

Although we generally agree that diversity and respect for differing cultures is a good thing, this does not mean that we cannot judge a practice to be unethical. Respect for diversity has its limits when it comes to ethical reasoning.

First, with regard to the subjectivists' claim that there are no universally accepted ideas among various cultures, upon further inspection this claim turns out to be false. It is true that cultures vary widely; however, the claim that there are no a priori universal truths among all societies in the world is categorical. We need only find one exception to this categorical statement and we have disproved the claim. In fact, we can find two prohibitions that apply in all societies. The first is a prohibition against the unjustified killing of a member of one's own group. No society could be formed or sustained that allows the indiscriminate killing of its members by other members. As civilizations have become more advanced, they have extended this protection to individuals from outside the society as well.

The second moral prohibition that can be found even among the most primitive societies is a prohibition against bearing false witness against a member of one's own group. Some level of trust and cooperation is necessary for any society to be sustained. A society that did not have such a prohibition would surely fail as its members would not be able to trust one another and cooperation would be nearly impossible. Again, all modern societies extend this even to individuals from outside the society.

So, we have disproved the claim that there are no "universal truths" that have applied to all societies, but is this all we can say? The answer is no. In fact, if this were all we could say, we would be on very shaky ground. Although we can only identify two "universal truths" that have applied to all societies at all times, we can find many more that have been or are becoming accepted by the vast majority of nations and communities. For example, almost every nation now subscribes (at least in theory) to the ideas that slave labor, unregulated child labor, torture, and genocide are morally reprehensible acts that must not be allowed. The perpetrators committing these acts must be punished.

Further, we must emphasize that there is a difference between what is actually done and how these societies actually feel about such practices. As Socrates points out in *The Republic*, you don't need the philosopher to tell you what is happening, but rather you need the philosopher to tell you what is the best we can become. We believe that although bribery and corruption in the bureaucracies of many countries may occur and even be tolerated, one should not confuse tolerance with moral approval. If one were to ask people in those nations if they approve of such practices, we would speculate that most would answer in the negative. In societies that oppress women, we believe that growing numbers wish it were different.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

Psychological egoism is a major challenge to ethics in that it is a deterministic theory. By deterministic, we mean that it posits that people cannot really help the way they act. If this is true, it presents a major problem for ethics because

it would be unfair to judge someone for behavior over which he or she has absolutely no control.

Individuals who subscribe to deterministic theories of behavior believe that, either by nature, nurture, or a combination of both, people are programmed and cannot really help but act or react in a given way in any situation. According to this theory, there really is no such thing as free will.

For example, a deterministic argument goes something like this. Suppose that an individual named Smith sees item X. As a result of seeing X, Smith wants X and has the ability to purchase X. However, Smith denies her desire and does not purchase X.

In the above example, most people would argue that it is a clear example of "free will." However, the determinist would argue that it is not "free will" because Smith is not free to want what she wants. Further, her seeming denial of what she wants may be motivated by other desires. She may place a higher value on something else such as the intrinsic satisfaction at showing restraint. However, she is still not free to want that either. Smith may be acting as a result of subconscious factors that even she is not aware of and has no control over.

Psychological egoism is a form of determinism that offers an explanation as to why we behave the way we do. According to this theory, people are inherently selfish. Since we are inherently selfish, psychological egoists argue that we will always act to preserve our own best interests.

At first glance, this theory appears on its face to be false. There are examples of people acting altruistically all the time. Take for example the case of the late Mother Teresa, who spent most of her life caring for the world's poorest, sickest, and most unwanted people. Surely this is a clear example of altruism. The psychological egoist would argue that Mother Teresa was simply doing what she wanted. The psychological egoist would say that she was perhaps motivated by the good feelings that she received as a result of her work, or perhaps by a belief that God told her to do this work and she would not want to disobey God. Whatever the motivation, the psychological egoist would say she was still acting out of a selfish motive.

In response to this descriptive view of human behavior, some thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes have developed a theory called ethical egoism to deal with the problem. According to an ethical egoist, we can channel our selfishness into a positive outcome. This can be seen clearly in Hobbes's statement regarding the state of nature and the subsequent formation of governments to deal with the problems created by the state of nature. Hobbes imagines a time before government when humanity lived in a state that was a "war of all against all" in which life was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." However, in this primitive state each individual is absolutely free. Hobbes posits that we came together and formed a "social contract" in which we agreed to give up some of our natural freedoms in exchange for security. In the short term, we may lose something, but it is worth it for the long-term gains that can be achieved in an atmosphere which fosters cooperation. Thus, the major premise is to structure social institutions and rules in such a way as to maximize the overall welfare by using each individual's self-interest.