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Edited by Richard Madsen and Tracy B. Strong: The Many and the One

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Introduction: Three Forms of Ethical Pluralism

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We are placed into various life-spheres, each of which is governed by different laws.

—Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*

The war on terrorism, say America's leaders, is a war of good versus evil. But in the minds of the perpetrators, the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon appear to have been justified as ethically good acts required by Islam against American evil. How can different ethical systems become so polarized that, to paraphrase the great German sociologist Max Weber, one person's God is another person's devil? In the world today, is such polarization leading inevitably to a violent "clash of civilizations"? Or can differences between ethical systems be reconciled through rational dialogue rather than political struggle? When this book was begun, the issues posed by ethical pluralism in the modern world were of considerable academic interest. Since the 11 September attacks, they have become matters of the most urgent public interest.

Taken as a whole, this book provides resources for thinking more clearly about the range of different ways in which humans understand the difference between good and bad, right and wrong, the universal and the parochial, as well as the tension between ecumenical and flexible versus fundamentalist and rigid responses to such difference. It contains nine major essays about how the problem of ethical pluralism can be understood by different philosophical and religious traditions: classical liberalism, liberal egalitarianism, critical theory, feminism, natural law, Confucianism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Each of the principal essays is paired with a shorter "response essay" that helps to highlight the range of understandings possible within each tradition. Unlike most works in ethical theory, this book juxtaposes modern secular philosophical traditions with older religious traditions. A concluding chapter summarizes the themes that emerge from these juxtapositions. In this introduction, we explore some of the philosophical considerations that can bring these juxtaposed traditions into genuine dialogue with one another.

The problems of ethical pluralism present themselves in the modern world on three different levels—what we might call the existential level, the cultural level, and the civilizational level.

THE EXISTENTIAL LEVEL

The epigraph from Max Weber reflects a common modern understanding. Human beings find themselves, whether they will it or not, in a world of incommensurable values. In our individual lives, we are pulled in incompatible directions. It is the lot of the modern person, in this understanding, to have to make choices between values—to choose *this*, such that this choice excludes *that* one. As Isaiah Berlin wrote in “Two Concepts of Liberty”: “The world we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of the other.”¹

Although, as Donald Moon notes in his conclusion, some of the chapters in this book use the term “ethical pluralism” to refer to such a situation, we in this introduction call it “existential pluralism,” to highlight the ways in which it confronts us with incommensurable choices, with our identities as particular persons. By “incommensurable” we mean here that there is no common standard by which the choices may be evaluated. The classical paradigm for this is Antigone who chooses to bury her brother in full consciousness that in doing so she is rejecting the authority of the laws of the city of which she is a member. In the modern world, however, the conflict between different values has become even more intense than in the age of Sophocles, because, as Max Weber observed, the various spheres of life—that is, religion, kinship, economics, politics, the realms of the aesthetic, the erotic, and the intellectual—have become increasingly differentiated. Thus, the values required to succeed in business are sharply separate from those required to be a loyal family member or a dedicated artist or devout believer.

The religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and classical philosophical traditions (natural law and Confucianism) represented in this book are all, as Joseph Chan puts it in his essay on Confucianism, “perfectionist,” that is, they assume that it is good to live a coherent ethical life, they have a substantive vision of such a life, and they hold that both state and society should help people to achieve this. One way to achieve such coherence would be to limit the development of diverse value spheres. The Taliban, for instance, banned television, restricted the content of education, and strictly confined women to the domestic sphere. Within most perfectionist ethical traditions one can find “fundamentalist” arguments

for limiting value spheres and thus saving society from the burdens of existential pluralism.

But each of the perfectionist traditions represented in this book also contains resources for accepting a wide range of values. They can be quite generous in their recognition that different persons can and should be able to pursue the good in different ways, and deserve the benefit of the doubt when their ways differ from conventional ways. All of the authors of the chapters on perfectionist traditions in this book emphasize the adaptability of their traditions to existential pluralism. (Fundamentalists would probably not have wanted to contribute to such a book.) Still, they all hold that a plurality of ethical practices is legitimate only insofar as it contributes to a transcendent substantive good. By comparing the main chapters and the response essays, the reader can get a sense of the arguments between more liberal and conservative positions within each tradition.

On the other hand, the modern secular philosophies represented here (classical liberalism, egalitarian liberalism, critical theory, and feminist theory) are resigned to the impossibility of integrating the diverse value spheres into a commonly accepted, ethically coherent order. They are procedural rather than perfectionist. Eschewing any final substantive understanding of the good, they focus on procedures that would allow individuals freely to pursue their versions of the good without interfering with the liberty of others. In theory at least, the painful, existential struggles that individuals must undergo when confronting incommensurable values are relegated to the private realm, where they cannot undermine the universally accepted public procedures that ensure an overall social order. Especially for liberalism, even though the boundaries between the two realms may not be always in the same place, this entails making a sharp separation between the public realm (the realm of universal legal procedures) and the private realm (the realm of particular versions of the substantive good).

It is important to recognize that such secular, procedural moral philosophical traditions have their own forms of fundamentalism that restrict the existential pluralism of a morally complex society. For instance, the supposedly neutral legal procedures prescribed by classical liberalism can be so constructed as to support the hegemony of a market economy that turns all values into mere commodities; and the distinction between public and private may be so defined as to shield the values of the market economy or the bureaucratic state from challenge by other values.² The debates among the secular philosophies represented here are partly debates about how to accommodate the full polyvalence of human ethical existence.

THE CULTURAL LEVEL

Different religious and philosophical traditions have different ways of accommodating the existential pluralism that is endemic to human social experience. Those intellectual traditions are rooted in the assemblages of lived practices that we call “cultures.” Global migration, communication, and commerce, of course, bring about an intermingling of cultures that can confuse and torment as well as immeasurably enrich. If the circumstances under which an individual makes choices between opposing and incommensurable values can resound of the “tragic,” as Berlin puts it in his essay, the situation seems even more intractable when it comes to the conflict between different cultural traditions. Antigone chooses between two alternatives that are both recognizably *hers*. I may have to choose, as a citizen of a Western country, between the demands of self-interest and the requirements of charity, but both of those choices are recognizable parts of a world that I recognize as *my own*. It is quite a different matter when the choice appears to be between two systems of value, one of which is acknowledged as mine, whereas the other is—*other*. In this introduction, we focus most of our attention on this level and we call this form of pluralism, manifested at the level of tension *between* rather than *within* cultures, “ethical pluralism.”³

Ethical pluralism, in this sense, is the recognition that there are in the world different ethical traditions, that these distinguish themselves at least in name one from the other, and differ not only in matters of practical judgment on moral issues (for instance, citizenship, euthanasia, relationships between the sexes) but in modes of reasoning used to reach such judgments. How can such traditions be brought into a mutually fruitful dialogue?

The Problem of Objectivity

First of all, we must confront the basic epistemological issues. Is it possible to attain any objective knowledge that transcends the broad historical, cultural, and political contexts within which one is embedded? Even philosophers of natural science are no longer certain that this is possible. Consider the discontinuity between Newtonian mechanics and quantum mechanics. From the framework of Newtonian mechanics, motion can be understood in deterministic terms. The relation from cause to effect is singular and in principle predictable. When, however, one looks at very small scale phenomena (the movement of electrons or protons), neither Newtonian mechanics nor, for that matter, Einsteinian relativity any longer “works.” Instead, depending on the measurement, protons sometimes behave like particles and sometimes like waves and the relation of

“cause” to “effect” is one of probability rather than determination. Is the universe a discontinuous “quantized” reality or a smoothly curved space-time continuum? Is it lawlike or not? What you see, it might appear, depends on where you sit.

The apparent irresolvability of such issues has raised questions in other branches of science. Might not all claims about physical reality be in some sense relative to the particular frameworks within which the scientist works, a framework so general and all-encompassing that to step outside of it would be in a real sense “revolutionary”? Thomas Kuhn gave the name “paradigm” to such frameworks and claimed, or at least appeared to claim, that basic terms (such as “length,” “time,” “velocity”) had different meanings in each paradigm.⁴

In philosophy, this situation came to be known as the “theory-ladenness of observations,”⁵ and it has been a topic of violent debate in the philosophy of science. At stake was, or seemed to be, the very possibility of objective knowledge. Was it really true that scientific judgments were relative to the theoretical framework of the scientist? If so, it would seem that the framework itself was subject to social and historical factors. There was, to recall Hegel, to be no jumping over Rhodes, no escape from the circumstances of one’s knowledge.⁶

Similar developments can be found in the human sciences.⁷ And here the matter is much more intense than in the physical sciences, for in the humanities “paradigms” claim more than simple epistemological actuality—they have histories, of greater or lesser length, and have, demonstrably, “worked” for those who have grown up “in” each system. Hence one may understand the world as a Christian, as a proponent of natural law, as a Muslim, as a Confucian, and so forth: what is important is that when one does so, one actually *is* a Christian, a Muslim, and so forth. In the ethical realm one does not so much *adopt* a particular perspective as *manifest* it. Whereas in the natural sciences quantum mechanics might have a pragmatic justification (i.e., it explains a lot even if not gravitation), in the ethical and moral realms, all systems not only seem to work but they rarely if ever offer themselves as choices. Generally one is born and brought up as a Muslim or a Christian or a Buddhist, or without religious belief. Even if one changes one’s beliefs, to the degree that one chooses an ethical framework that choice is less likely to be the results of pragmatic considerations than of some kind of conversion experience. Furthermore, by and large people do not live and die over the question of quantum versus relativistic physics, but various peoples have slaughtered others over differences in religious and ethical beliefs. In human relations, what appears to be at stake when one set of ethics confronts another is often personal identity.

Faced with such fundamental epistemological problems, is there any way we can transcend the differences between ethical traditions? It is important to note that in practice the encounter of different traditions has often provided the basis for a genuine mutual enrichment. There is, for instance, a line of social criticism that goes from Diderot to Margaret Mead that looked—with greater or lesser accuracy—to the South Seas as paradigms of enlightened sexual morality when compared with straitlaced Anglo-European practices.⁸ Here the encounter with others can serve as the foundation for a critique of practices in one's own society. But the encounter can also be violent, as we have recently seen in the confrontation between Western cultural traditions and militantly fundamentalist understandings of Islam.

Moral Relativism?

What are the philosophical bases for harmonious rather than conflictual encounters? One basis might be a principled acceptance of moral relativism—but this is undermined by the fear that power will then determine what counts as morally and ethically true.

Generally speaking, moral relativism is the doctrine that in matters of morality there are no universals. By universals one means here the actuality of standards by which to judge moral action, standards that are themselves independent of historical and individual contingencies.

Historically, the experience of moral relativism did initially provoke a move toward toleration. Precisely because there were no universal standards divorced from particular practices, one could not claim a privileged status for any practice, including one's own. The foundations for contemporary moral relativism were laid in Europe in the reactions to the wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. David Hume can perhaps stand in for the others. When Hume argued that “it was not irrational for me to prefer the destruction of the entire world to the merest scratching of my little finger,”⁹ he was specifically denying that rationality could settle moral quandaries. Thus, the purpose of Hume's social thought was to replace contingency with practice.¹⁰ An accumulated set of practices defined a people (call it a moral tradition) and thus an identity. Hume was struck by this power of historical identity and did all he could to foster that power. “Nothing,” he proclaimed, “is more surprising to those who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few.” The surprise, however, was due to the “philosophical eye,” that is, to the desire to want from moral practices something that one could not have, namely a universal standard. He continues: “It is . . . on opinion only that government is founded, and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military

governments as well as to the most free and most popular.”¹¹ He concludes this essay with a ringing endorsement to “cherish and encourage our ancient government as much as possible.” The opinions that the English have are to be encouraged and each of the six volumes that Hume wrote on the *History of England* was designed to further that aim.¹² A modern version of this is the “value pluralism” that Donald Moon associates in this in this volume with the thought of Isaiah Berlin: once societies meet a certain minimal standard for decency (itself perhaps harder to define than Berlin thought), ranking different forms of life is in principle impossible.

The message here is that if a people have a set of practices that work, it will by definition have accepted them, have found them viable, and should in general continue to pursue them. Other peoples will have different practices. As long as they “work,” there is nothing definitive that one people can say about the other. Moral relativism is premised on the notion not only that philosophy has in the end little to say to resolve tensions between different moral and ethical practices, but also that it should not attempt to resolve them.

Such a relaxed acceptance of moral relativism has proved hard to maintain, especially in the past century, as it succumbed to a second fear, the fear that power will determine what counts as “truth.” This fear can be summarized as “What if Hitler had won?” Here the anxiety derives from the recognition that prevailing power and historical success may become the determinant of what might count as morally (or indeed factually) true. As such the fear is most characteristic of modern Western times. In her essay “Truth and Politics,” Hannah Arendt recalls and updates a story from the second decade of the past century: “Clemenceau, shortly before his death, found himself engaged in a friendly talk with a representative of the Weimar Republic on the question of guilt for the outbreak of World War I. ‘What in your opinion,’ Clemenceau was asked, ‘will future historians think of this troublesome and controversial issue?’ He replied, ‘this I don’t know. But I know for certain that this will not say that Belgium invaded Germany.’” Arendt continues: “[T]o eliminate from the record the fact that on the night of August 4, 1914, German troops crossed the frontier of Belgium . . . would require no less than a power monopoly over the entire civilized world. But such a power monopoly is far from being inconceivable.”¹³ World War II and the increasing power of technology and the media dramatically exacerbate Arendt’s worry.

Given that toleration of Nazism as “just another system” appeared to be an impossibility, the need for something other than a pragmatic justification of moral and ethical practices became pressing. It is noteworthy that Anglo-European liberal democracies and in general those cultures that draw their moral inspiration from monotheistic religion have often

been more concerned about moral relativism than have countries in other regions of the world.¹⁴ The People's Republic of China and Singapore, among others, regularly insist that certain Western views about, for instance, the universality of human rights, are out of place in those countries.¹⁵ To insist on them would constitute a kind of category mistake, an epistemological error, as it were. Against this view, the justification of the destruction of the World Trade Center as an attack on the "enemies of Islam" appears simply unacceptable to most all who share the ethical point(s) of view broadly characteristic of the North Atlantic countries. Acknowledgment of the legitimacy of difference goes only so far before it becomes hostility.

The reasons that these issues seem to give rise to the greater anxiety in the "West" have several possible origins. In part they may be consequent to the fact that the past 200 years of human history have seen the balance of world power move to the North Atlantic nations. In part, they also arise because after the horrors of the first part of the twentieth century, the Western tradition—or at least important parts of it—now seemed to require a foundation for itself that transcended questioning. Betraying a note of anxiety, the American Founding Fathers had already written that they held certain "truths to be self-evident," by which it was meant that anyone denying them questioned the evidence of his or her senses. But suppose someone, or some set of events, did? Put bluntly, the inherited practices of supposedly civilized Western nations no longer seem adequate against their rivals.

Beyond Relativism

What might be the philosophical basis for transcending moral relativism while respecting the integrity of different moral traditions? What kinds of valid judgments can someone from one tradition make on those from another? Three issues appear.

First, is the system flexible on its own terms? If so, one would be able to say that in certain areas of moral life, those who identify themselves with a given system might have, in the terms of that system, made a mistake. Thus someone who considers him or herself a Muslim might think that the practice of *requiring* that women wear a burqa is mistaken, without this negating his or her self-identification as a Muslim.¹⁶ It is important to understand all systems are to some degree flexible and thus permit criticism, *on their own terms*, both by those inside the system and by those outside it. As Donald Moon notes in his essay, one might think this a form of "perspectival pluralism," itself consequent to a "structural pluralism" characteristic of (at least) "modern" societies.

The question is how far that flexibility can extend without calling self-identification into question. The pronouncements of Osama bin Laden to the effect that Islam requires the destruction of the forces of the Christian West and of Israel reflect the deep sense that Islam is corrupted, potentially beyond repair, by the connivance of those presently governing many Muslim countries with the forces of the “West.” All moral systems contain a range of interpretations of what it means to be a member of that system: this is consequent to the fact that moral systems are historical accumulations of practices and interpretations and by nature not completely consistent. The claim, however, that a moral system *requires* one particular practice and excludes all those in contradiction with it (wearing a burqa or not) cannot be refuted in terms of the system.

Thus we have a second issue: can particular judgments of the system be brought under the criteria of a moral code that is broader than that of the system itself? It is one thing to argue that in terms of Islam the practice of veiling women is not *necessary*, but quite another to say that it is wrong because of some standard that transcends Islam and is derived from a general understanding of morality—for instance, that men and women ought to as a general principle enjoy similar autonomy. Here it is a matter of whether the demand that a particular practice in a given system be abolished or changed threatens the self-identification of individuals as members of that system. (As a parallel, one might argue that one could play something that was recognizably the game of chess without using the *en passant* capture rule, where one could not play it if all the pieces moved in the same manner.) To the degree that it does, such a change will tend to be rejected by those who identify themselves as members of a given system.

If, however, one cannot determine a universal moral system in terms of which one might make a judgment about practices characteristic of individual moral systems, a third issue arises. Now the question is, can one declare certain systems as a whole to be so deeply flawed as to require rejection by some general moral standards? One might argue that the economic and social system in the antebellum American South not only practiced but required slavery to survive, in that the mode of life practiced and admired there depended on the free-slave distinction.¹⁷ In such a case, nothing more than the elimination of such a system would be necessary. Elimination, however, on what grounds? Such a question reflects an anxiety about how one *knows* that something like slavery, or Nazism, or religiously intolerant cultures are morally wrong.

This returns us to and forces us to consider the question of what kind of knowledge would permit us to reject enough of the practices of another moral system such that those who adhered to it no longer recognized

themselves in its terms. There are, roughly speaking, three ways in which one might approach this problem.

The most dominant Western approach to this problem presented by ethical pluralism has been to identify a core of values on which all reasonable people might agree and then to try to extend that core rationally to different practices and cultures. The work of John Rawls can stand in for the others.¹⁸ Rawls has powerfully argued that rational individuals choosing from behind a “veil of ignorance” (such that they do not know what their position will be in a society they might choose to establish) will choose institutions that do not severely advantage or disadvantage anyone who might have a given quality (handsome, rich, white, smart, and so forth). Such choices will then not be made in terms of an individual’s self-interest, but in terms of what common arrangements one would be willing to take one’s chances at living under. They would so choose, Rawls argues, because they would not rationally want to undergo the possibility of winding up in a seriously disadvantaged position. Thus, Rawls tries to identify a core to moral and ethical judgments to which any person, no matter of what culture or social circumstances, would rationally assent.

Rawls’s argument powerfully establishes a core of judgments that humans might rationally agree upon; but it is less successful when attempting to extend those judgments to particular policy controversies. While religious toleration, opposition to slavery, and perhaps some degree of civil disobedience seem rationally entailed policies, matters are much less clear on other pressing issues (abortion or euthanasia, for instance).¹⁹ Indeed, if we were to agree with Sir Isaiah Berlin that some systems of value are truly incommensurable, we could not hope to find such a common rational core. A second approach to resolving the problem of ethical pluralism is exemplified by John Gray.²⁰ Instead of trying to resolve the conflicts between different systems of value by subordinating them to a common standard of rationality, he assumes that they all are, or can be, right. He insists only that they limit their claims on human beings for the sake of what he calls a “modus vivendi”—a kind of live and let live that permits others to coexist without forcing their standards of moral right and wrong on one another. Universals are thus for Gray a kind of negative: all have a right not to be tortured, not to be separated from their friends and family involuntarily, not to be humiliated, not to be subject to avoidable disease, and so forth.

Gray’s position would accept a contradictory system of value as long as its advocates accepted it voluntarily and did not try to force it on others. But suppose an ethical system is so rooted in a culture’s language and basic socialization processes that people voluntarily accept practices that other ethical systems regard as dehumanizing. Some young girls in some

cultures accept clitoridectomy as a “natural” part of maturing and the need to regulate sexual desire. Is there any basis for criticizing this?²¹ If the young women are socially conditioned to accept such a practice, why is this a problem—we are socially conditioned to accept many things. Why should we think that the standards by which a person lives his or her life be in some strong sense of the word his or her *own* standards, in the sense of having been chosen consciously? There is a line of thought in the Western tradition that dates back to Socrates that holds that they should. There is, however, a line of thought in, say, the Confucian framework that holds precisely that they should not.

A problem with both the position of Rawls and that of Gray is that they are derived from fundamental assumptions of the Western Enlightenment about the possibility and indeed necessity for human individuals to achieve moral autonomy through the use of reason. It is difficult to use them as a basis for genuine dialogue with non-Western traditions, especially religiously based ones, that do not fully accept such fundamental assumptions. It is also difficult to reconcile them with recent perspectives in Western thought that emphasize the extent to which our notions of freedom and rationality are constructed by language and culture. Thus, there is a third approach to transcending the differences among ethical systems. Exemplified in North America by the work of Charles Taylor, with roots in the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and the sociology of Emile Durkheim, this approach would not merely tolerate ethical difference but would engage it as a path toward deeper forms of human community. As Charles Taylor puts it, “The crucial idea is that people can bond not in spite of but because of difference. They can sense, that is, that their lives are narrower and less full alone than in association with each other. In this sense, the difference defines a complementarity.”²²

According to this approach one needs to strive for a full understanding of the other, because without such an understanding, one cannot truly know oneself. Full self-understanding is initially restricted by our horizon of unexamined assumptions. The attempt to understand other cultures and systems of morality leads to a “fusion of horizons” in which we gain a broader set of terms to reflect critically on our identity.²³ This approach by no means precludes criticisms of other moral systems. But it insists that for such criticism of particular moral practices to be valid, the criticism must be predicated on a broad understanding of what the practices mean in their overall contexts—and criticism of the other should be accompanied by self-criticism.

In each case, what needs to be criticized is the tendency to deny our relationship with that which is inextricably connected to us. Jean-Luc

Nancy, a French philosopher, concludes an essay entitled “La comparution/compearance” as follows:

But to exclude, exclusion must designate: it names, identifies, gives form. “The other” is for us a figure imposed on the unrepresentable [*le infigurable*]. Thus we have for us—to go to a heart of the matter—the “Jew” or the “Arab,” figures whose closeness, that is their in-common with “us,” is no accident.²⁴

“Us” here reflects that Nancy speaks as a Frenchman and a member of the French moral “community.” The problem of the “other,” as he goes on clearly to recognize, will be specifically different for other communities, although not structurally different. The double question is thus always: “How to exclude without fixing [*figurer*]? And to fix without excluding?”²⁵

The answer to Nancy’s question is at the heart of the questions raised by ethical pluralism, and it is difficult. We think it might go something like this. Let us consider the problem of the outsider or the other—for Nancy here the “Arab,” but in the context of this book it could be the Muslim, the Confucian, the Christian, the woman, and so on. One has to admit that in some sense this other—who or whatever it may be—is different from us. Indeed, not to admit this would be to deny the actuality of the other’s presence to me (and of mine to it).

Western liberalism has tended to sidestep this encounter with difference, by relegating incommensurable values to the “private” realm. It is only in the public realm that considerations of justice and enforcement of moral standards are relevant: thus one can believe what one wants, do in one’s bedroom what one wants (with “consenting adults,” tellingly), and so forth. Issues such as race therefore and sexual orientation must generally be deemed private matters. Such considerations, however, seem to us to raise a serious question. How can it be that what may be centrally important to me (my sexual orientation, my race) be irrelevant to how I appear to others in the public realm, and likewise that the race and sexual preference of others should be publicly insignificant to me?²⁶ Part of what justice requires may include not denying the other’s presence to me.

To overcome such denial we may need to criticize the Rawlsian assumption that the other and I could or do have common understandings of primary goods. If we assume all reasonable people ought to share such common understandings, then we easily dehumanize those who in fact do not. (“Can you believe how they treat women?” “They are animals and killers: they think abortion is all right.” And so forth.)

But how can we criticize without dehumanizing? How, for instance, could we criticize a culture that justified slavery? We could do so on the

basis of its inability to account for the full humanity of others. When we claim that so and so is a “slave” or attribute an other such definition to what an individual is, what is it that we are missing about them, or what is it that we want to miss? Stanley Cavell’s *The Claim of Reason* helps us here: “[W]hat [a man who sees certain others as slaves] is missing is not something about slaves exactly and not exactly about human beings. He is missing something about himself, or rather something about his connection with these people, his internal relation with them, so to speak.”²⁷ Cavell goes on to point out that my actions show that I cannot mean in fact that the other is not human, or is less than human.

When he wants to be served at the table by a black hand, he would not be satisfied to be served by a black paw. When he rapes a slave, or takes her as a concubine, he does not feel that he has by that fact itself, embraced sodomy. When he tips a black taxi driver . . . it does not occur to him that he might more appropriately have patted the creature fondly on the side of the neck.²⁸

No matter what the slave owner, the Frenchman, and the Christian can claim (and assert that they truly believe), their actions show that they hold to something quite different. They can allow that the others have qualities (their cuisine, their music, for instance), but what they cannot allow is for them to see themselves as the other sees them. For then, they would see themselves as they are seen. (Montesquieu saw this refusal and in the *Persian Letters* named it the central quality of tyranny.)

From this it would seem that the question that the actuality of ethical pluralism raises is not so much the status of the practices of other ethical systems, but *what it would mean actually to acknowledge the status of one’s own*. Such an approach—and perhaps one of the achievements of this book—is not (only) to gain recognition of the other but of oneself.

THE CIVILIZATIONAL LEVEL

By giving us resources for understanding the world’s major ethical traditions and for reflecting philosophically on how to reconcile them, this book may help us confront the political and social challenges of our time. It is said that we live in a global village, but the more apt metaphor is that of a global city. Villages were traditionally tied together by a common culture and by thick bonds of interlocking social relations. The modern city brings into abrasive contact people from many different cultures, encourages them to compete with one another in a common marketplace, and yet hopes that they will perceive enough mutual interdependence and achieve enough mutual understanding to live together in peace. Often this works, but sometimes cities break down into ugly strife. In an increasingly

globalized world, the opportunities for constructive interconnection are tremendous, but so are the dangers of deadly conflict.

A key factor in maintaining peace in the global city is the capacity of people to cooperate constructively with those who share different beliefs and ethical commitments. This involves establishing institutions that both protect and limit ethical pluralism—that protect the right of different people to carry out practices that others find incomprehensible and disagreeable and yet establish enough of a limit on diversity to prevent anarchy. But different types of societies have different ways of doing this, differences based not simply on moral principles but on configurations of political arrangements bolstered by economic interests. The United States contains the potentially divisive forces of ethical pluralism through a kind of liberal hegemony. Although many Americans are morally multilingual, drawing on a variety of ethical traditions to make major life decisions, their public lingua franca, as it were, is mainly based on some combination of classical and egalitarian liberalism. The major institutions of the United States are based on this liberal understanding and continuously reinforce it. Central to this institutional order are laws that separate church and state and that relegate many contentious ethical disagreements to the private realm, a secular public education system, and an occupational system that primarily rewards technical competence. Though constantly challenged, these arrangements have proven quite robust. The United Kingdom and Anglophone Canada have very similar institutional arrangements and those of most continental European countries are broadly similar. In the Middle East, however, there have been attempts to govern diverse societies through institutions based on Islamic law; and in Singapore there is an attempt to organize a society on the basis of a modernized state Confucianism. Is it possible for societies whose public life is based on the hegemony of moral principles other than Western liberalism—for example, societies whose major institutions are based on Islamic Sharia or Confucian ideology—to accommodate the relatively high degrees of ethical pluralism that come with modernization?

There are some in the West—could we call them “liberal fundamentalists”?—who say that it is not possible, that “they” have to become like “us” if they are to be fully modern, stable, and peaceful.²⁹ Such liberal fundamentalists would tolerate only those forms of Islam, Judaism, or Christianity that were content to relegate themselves to a private sphere, as they are in the United States, and they would find a state based on Sharia—even if it was a fairly flexible form of Sharia—to be in principle intolerable. Are we then really destined for a “clash of civilizations”³⁰ that cannot be resolved until the whole world adopts the liberal institutions of the West? Or are there multiple models for a humane, flexible moder-

nity? Can the modern globally interdependent world accommodate “civilizational pluralism” as well as ethical pluralism? The essays presented here may help us ask such questions, but answers would entail sociological and political discussions that are beyond the scope of this book.



The practices that led to the creation of this book, however, may at least give us hopeful examples of how the challenges posed by existential, ethical, and civilizational pluralism can be resolved in a constructive, peaceful way. This volume is the third in a series from an Ethikon Institute project on “Ethical Pluralism, Civil Society, and Political Culture.” A nonprofit and nonsectarian organization concerned with the social implications of ethical pluralism, the Ethikon Institute sponsors programs to explore a diversity of moral outlooks, secular and religious, and to identify commonalities among them. As with the other volumes in the series, this book began in a dialogue conference engaging spokespersons for nine different ethical perspectives. In this case, the conference was held 25–27 June, 1999 in La Jolla, California. Participants were requested to address a common set of questions:

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS: Is the ideal society one that embodies or aims for ethical uniformity, or one that emphasizes instead the accommodation of ethical pluralism?

SOCIAL REGULATION: Should the power of the state ever be invoked to protect, ban, or otherwise regulate ethically based differences? If so, where and how should the state be involved?

CITIZENSHIP: How should ethically based disagreements on the rights and duties of citizenship be dealt with? For example, how should dissenting positions on the civil status of women be handled in civil society?

LIFE-AND-DEATH DECISIONS: To what extent, if any, should the power of the state be utilized to regulate decision making on life and death issues? For example, how should ethically based conflict on physician-assisted suicide be handled?

HUMAN SEXUALITY: To what extent, if any, should conflicting ethical positions on sexual relationships be accommodated? For example, should society agree or decline to recognize same-sex unions as a form of marriage?

These questions forced participants to confront some of the most contentious areas of disagreement among the various traditions. Yet the discussions were carried out with a great deal of openness and civility, a testament not only to the personal qualities of the participants but to the richness of the various traditions.

Every major ethical tradition is the product of a long historical conversation among many different, often contradictory voices. Within any tra-

dition, including the liberal tradition, one can find currents of thought that would sharpen the differences between its basic ideas and those of other traditions and would draw out the implications of those differences with rigid logic. For all traditions, judgments about concrete moral and political issues require something akin to what Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, called “practical reason.” As quoted in John Haldane’s essay on natural law in this volume, Aquinas wrote:

Speculative reason . . . is different . . . from practical reason. For, since speculative reason is concerned chiefly with necessary things, which cannot be otherwise than they are, its proper conclusions, like universal principles are necessarily true. Practical reason, on the other hand, is concerned with contingent matters, about which human actions are concerned, and consequently, although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter deviations. . . . Accordingly, in matters of action, truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all in respect of detail but only as to the general principles, and where there is the same rectitude in matters of detail, it is not equally known to all.

Even where ethical traditions differ as to general principles, therefore, people working within different traditions can find many areas of overlapping consensus when it comes to evaluating practical policies for living and working together. Our Ethikon dialogue demonstrated that it is indeed possible to find common ground, even on some of the most contentious issues, among people deeply committed to and highly articulate about widely different ethical traditions. And even where common ground is not possible, it is possible to find robust justifications within each tradition for resolving disagreements peacefully.

Through dialogue it is even possible to soften the differences between “general principles” because the meaning of these principles can change when they are understood within different social and cultural contexts. Giving a serious account of major ethical traditions never takes place in a historical vacuum. It is always a response to the moral predicaments arising in certain political and social contexts. Thus the style and content of the essays in this book bear the marks of the state of the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The specific questions that frame each essay would not have been addressed several generations ago. For instance, physician-assisted suicide has only recently become an issue for contentious public debate, made so at least partially because of recent advances in life-prolonging medical technology. Likewise, same-sex marriage has only become debatable in recent decades (in the United States and Europe at least) because of changing social mores. Meanwhile, increasing flows of international migration have shattered the cultural ho-

mogeneity of many societies, leading to new debates about how to respect the citizen rights of minority communities.

Besides generating the questions that structure this book, the contemporary social context has an important influence on the style of answering the questions. Especially since the end of the Cold War, the eruption of religious and ethnic warfare has raised the stakes in discussions about ethical pluralism. Ecumenically oriented scholars feel increasing urgency to build bridges to other traditions. This may lead them to develop the implications of their tradition with a greater degree of circumspection than during times when they did not have to fear that wars of words might lead to wars with weapons.

Above and beyond these more immediate political considerations, however, are ways in which the general conditions of late (or post?) modernity shape the understanding of ethical traditions. Even when representing traditions that are thousands of years old, the chapters in this book interpret them in a distinctly modern light. David Little's chapter on Christianity, for instance, quotes less from the New Testament than from Roger Williams, the seventeenth-century dissenting Calvinist who did much to shape American thinking about freedom of conscience. Menachem Fisch writes from the point of view of Orthodox Judaism, which accepts the halakha—the code of Jewish law developed in late antiquity—as “the first place of reference and sole arbiter of authority.” But he interprets this ancient law through the rulings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century rabbis, and he applies these rulings to contemporary dilemmas faced by Jews in the modern state of Israel.

The conditions of modernity include a pervasive, now globalized, market economy, which both enables and propels people to take individual initiative in seeking their comparative advantage. This leads to a heightened stress on individual autonomy, at odds with the emphasis in most classical religious traditions on the individual's embeddedness in society. Even though classic texts (though not the historical practice) of all of the religious traditions presented here emphasize the need for morality to be based on voluntary commitment rather than force, the expectations of modernity increase this emphasis and demand a focus on it. Most classical religious traditions assumed that the different spheres of life could be integrated into a harmonious whole, and the authors of this book's chapters on the religiously based ethical traditions advocate somewhat different forms of modernity—different patterns of relationship between economy, polity, society, and culture—than that of Anglo-American liberalism. But they each assume that the tensions between the various value spheres are here to stay, and that their traditions must be interpreted in such a way as to meet the complex ethical demands of such a world.

On the other hand, the authors of the chapters on the modern, secular traditions of liberalism, critical theory, and feminism are not without challenges in trying to formulate their traditions in ways that take account of early twenty-first-century modernity. In general, they stress the need for individual autonomy more than the religious traditions, but at the dawn of the new millennium they have to contend with a world dominated by huge multinational organizations. The apparent pluralism promised in such a world often seems superficial—a “Benetton pluralism,” as one of our authors puts it.³¹ As is apparent in the essays in this book, modern, secular ethical theories, which stress the autonomy of the empowered individual, have to struggle with basic definitions of fundamental concepts like “individual autonomy” and “empowerment,” and they have to be critically sensitive to the possibility of ethnocentrism within their traditions. All of our authors therefore struggle to maintain a balance between what Lee Yearley, in his commentary on Joseph Chan’s essay on Confucianism, calls “elaboration” and “emendation.” The former tries to use the best historical and textual scholarship to understand the foundational documents of a tradition, the latter tries to reformulate the ideas to answer new questions. Part of the debate during the Ethikon conference concerned the extent to which the authors could remain faithful to their traditions while emending them sufficiently to respond to the pressing public questions of today.

There was no easy resolution to such debates, because the current condition of the world is full of paradoxes that no major ethical tradition can easily comprehend. Modernity inspires and indeed demands a quest for personal autonomy, to be achieved through constant criticism of all traditions and by the unmasking of the relations of power beneath all high-sounding principles. Yet it also delivers what Max Weber called an iron cage (or, in the more sunny formulation of the journalist Thomas Friedman, a “golden straitjacket”).³² People are encouraged to express their freedom by creating their own unique forms of life, but they find themselves under increased pressures to conform to the demands of the state and the needs of the market. When the perfectionist ethical traditions of the major world religions are institutionalized within the structures of the modern state, the result is all too often the forced imposition of officially approved ethical standards upon a population—a result that core texts of all these traditions say is unacceptable. Yet, when secular, procedural ethics are institutionalized within modern political economies, the result is often a combination of bureaucratic regulations and market pressures that stifles authentic pluralism—a result that contradicts the fundamental aspirations of such modern theories.

The scholars who represent each of the major ethical traditions included in this book all realize that, in their present form, none of their

traditions can easily resolve such paradoxes. Therefore they genuinely need to listen to one another and learn from another. The dialogue around the table at the Ethikon conference was marked by this spirit of earnest listening and critical but sympathetic argument. Unfortunately, the fluidity and effervescence of that spoken, face-to-face dialogue cannot be reproduced on the printed page. Still, we hope that enough of its aura emanates from these essays that readers will begin stimulating dialogues of their own about how to utilize the richness of insight made possible by the world's ethical pluralism to meet the social and political challenges of a diverse, yet interdependent world.

NOTES

1. Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

2. For a lively critique of what one might call “neoliberal fundamentalism,” see Harvey Cox, “Mammon and the Culture of the Market: A Socio-Theological Critique” in Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, eds., *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 124–35.

3. For the sake of making our argument in this introduction as clear as possible, we reserve the term “ethical pluralism” for pluralism at this cultural level. As Donald Moon points out in his conclusion, however, the essays in this book use the term “ethical pluralism” in a number of senses. Sometimes they refer to what we are here calling “existential pluralism.” Other times they use it in the way we are using it in this introduction. Other times they use it to refer to the theory of value we have associated with Isaiah Berlin, that it is impossible in principle to adjudicate differences among values.

4. Thomas A. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). See also Stephen Toulmin, “Conceptual Revolution in Science,” *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 3, ed. R.S. Cohen (Dordrecht: Riedel, 1966).

5. See, for instance, C. R. Kordig, “The Theory-Ladenness of Observations,” *Review of Metaphysics* 24, 3 (March 1971): 448–84. For a discussion, see Tracy B. Strong, *The Idea of Political Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), chap. 3.

6. The phrase comes from the end of the introduction to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.

7. This has been a subject of repeated concern to Alasdair MacIntyre, among others. See his *Whose Judgement? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). For specific studies, albeit from a point of view different than that of MacIntyre, see, inter alia, Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993). See also Peter Winch,

The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1990), as well as his “Understanding a Primitive Society,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1, 4 (1964): 307–24. For critique of Winch that would be relevant to the others, see Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes, *Rationality and Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

8. See Denis Diderot, *Supplement au Voyage de Bougainville*, ed. G. Chanard (Paris: Draz, 1935); Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (New York: New American Library, 1949).

9. David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, II, ii, 3 (London: Penguin, 1983) p. 463. Toward the beginning of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (p. 55 (B 20); see also pp. 44 and 127–28), Kant famously remarked that it was “destructive of philosophy” that no one had been able successfully to resolve the argument in Hume as to the apparently purely contingent character of the relation between facts and understanding. One may read Kant’s project in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* as an attempt at resolving Hume’s argument first on the epistemological level and secondly on the ethical one.

10. See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 127 (B 127).

11. Hume, *Political Essays* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs Merrill, 1974), p. 24.

12. The most brilliant dissection of this kind of history is by J.G.A. Pocock, *The English Constitution and the Feudal Law* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967).

13. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Viking: New York, 1968), p. 239.

14. See Barrington Moore Jr., *Moral Purity and Persecution in History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

15. For a discussion of this question, see Daniel Bell, *East Meets West: Human Rights and Democracy in East Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

16. For the importance of veiling, see Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

17. See here Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery* (New York: Pantheon, 1965); in the nineteenth century, the writings of Calhoun and Fitzhugh argued something like the same position but from the other political standpoint.

18. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).

19. This may in fact be due to the “core-periphery” model on which Rawls works.

20. See John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (New York: New Press, 2000); see also the work of Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, and William Kymlicka among others.

21. For a discussion of the inadequacies of some standard Western understandings, see Anne Norton’s “review” of three books on women and multicultural questions in *Political Theory* 29, 5 (October 2001): 721–26.

22. Charles Taylor, “Democracy, Inclusive and Exclusive,” in Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, eds., *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 191.

23. *Ibid.* p. 191. See also, H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. Garret Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

24. Jean-Luc Nancy, "La Comparution/Compearance," *Political Theory* 20, 3 (August 1992): 392 (translation by Strong).

25. *Ibid.*, p. 393.

26. For a discussion of this on race, see Utz Lars McKnight, *The Political Theory of Liberalism and Race* (Lund: University of Lund Press, 1998).

27. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 377.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 428.

29. One might adduce here Susan Moller Okin, ed., *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). See some of the responses to her chapter collected in that book as well as the review by Anne Norton in *Political Theory*.

30. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

31. See, for example, Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad or McWorld* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

32. Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).