In this reading, the contemporary Ohio University philosopher, Gene Blocker first tries to clarify precisely what ethical relativism is and then considers arguments for and against it. Unusual in Blocker’s article is his claim that the ethical relativist cannot support the moral principle of tolerance. Why not? This would seem to be the relativist’s strongest argument. Also questionable is Blocker’s claim that the ethical relativist is often less tolerant than the ethical absolutist. Why does he hold that view, and do you agree? But surely, the strangest of all is Blocker’s assertion that no one can (really, sincerely) be an ethical relativist! Surely, there are many ethical relativists in the world today. How can Blocker claim there can’t be any?

Ethics is the search for the most general and objectively valid moral principles. This assumes that there are such universal, objectively valid moral principles and, conversely, that if there are not such objectively valid moral principles, then ethics is strictly impossible. But it is precisely the existence of objective ethical standards which is denied by the popular view known as “ethical relativism.”

What is ethical relativism? As we will see, that is not as easy to answer as it might seem at first. But the basic idea behind the theory is clear enough. It is based on the fact that different people hold different moral beliefs which are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile. We are all familiar with the fact that different people believe in different moral principles. Today, for example, the debate rages concerning abortion; some people feel quite strongly that abortion in any form is simply murder, while others feel equally strongly that abortion is morally justifiable in certain circumstances, and that even where it is not morally defensible, the state has no right to interfere in a woman’s personal decision in such a private matter.

We are also familiar with the fact that different societies hold different moral principles and standards. Polygamy is acceptable in Islamic societies
although it is illegal in Judeo-Christian countries of Europe and North America. And we are equally familiar with differences in moral beliefs within the same society over time. Slavery was an acceptable practice in most societies of the world until fairly recently; it was morally approved in ancient Greece, for example, but occasional pockets of slavery discovered here and there in the world today are universally condemned.

Ethical relativism is a reflection of such differences in moral practices and beliefs around the world and throughout history, and the difficulty in resolving such differences to everyone’s satisfaction. It is, most simply put, the view that different moral standards are right for different individuals and for different societies. What is right for one person or society is not necessarily right for another person or society. Polygamy is right in Saudi Arabia and wrong in the United States. Slavery used to be morally right, though it is now morally wrong.

In many ways ethical relativism is an attractive position and its widespread popularity today is not difficult to understand or explain. We live in a pluralistic society in which tolerance and respect for differing opinions are important, widely-shared, positive values. To reject ethical relativism would seem to be a form of dogmatic and intolerant “ethnocentrism,” arbitrarily insisting that one’s own particular brand of moral principles is the only correct one to adopt. If everyone in the world adopted such an ethnocentric position, we would all be constantly at each other’s throats. Historically, the times we live in seem to call for greater understanding of and respect for the views of other people. What difference does it make whether we greet one another by shaking hands, kissing on both checks, embracing, or in some other way? How could any particular culture assume that its customs were morally superior to any other? Isn’t that the rankest form of bigoted conceit which we would all want to avoid at all costs?

But there are problems with ethical relativism, too, which should make us reluctant to accept it too readily. First of all, it is not at all clear just what ethical relativism means. When the ethical relativist says that polygamy is right in Saudi Arabia and wrong in the United States, does be mean (1) that polygamy is considered or thought to be right by the Saudis and wrong by the Americans, or (2) that polygamy is morally correct in Saudi Arabia and morally wrong in the U. S. A.? The first is a purely descriptive statement, while the second is an evaluative, normative, or, as it is sometimes called, prescriptive statement. To say that polygamy is thought to be morally correct in Saudi Arabia is simply to state a matter of well-known and uncontested
fact. The person making this statement is not expressing his or her own value judgement on polygamy. The speaker might be a Christian who disapproves of polygamy, but who can still truthfully report the polygamous practices and beliefs of the Saudis. As a matter of fact this is what they believe, whether we share that belief or not.

As such (1) is not a moral judgment, or normative statement at all and consequently does not belong to ethics. Only the second is a prescriptive, normative judgment belonging to ethics proper. The first is the kind of statement made by the value-free scientific inquiry of anthropology, sociology, or history, rather than a value-laden, normative judgment made by a moralist or a moral philosopher. And, while the second is highly controversial, the first is a mere statement of plain fact over which there can be no real disagreement.

But this crucial ambiguity is masked in ordinary English, where “Polygamy is morally right in Saudi Arabia” can mean either that the Saudis think that polygamy is morally right or that polygamy is morally right, at least within Saudi Arabia. Since only the second has any possible relevance as an ethical theory, we will consider only the second interpretation of the ethical relativist’s statement to be ethical relativism proper. The problem is that the ethical relativist is himself often confused by this shift in meaning and his account of ethical relativism wavers back and forth between the first and the second interpretation, sometimes meaning the first and sometimes meaning the second, without any clear sense of the difference between them. The result is therefore apt to be confusing.

But assuming that ethical relativism proper can only be the second, normative and prescriptive claim above, how does the ethical relativist argue from the obviously true matters of fact in the descriptive claim of the first interpretation (that different people have different moral beliefs) to the more controversial normative, prescriptive claims involved in the second (that what is morally right varies from person to person, society to society), which we are here considering ethical relativism proper?

Because of the ambiguities and confusions mentioned above in the ethical relativist’s claims, the difference between the descriptive and the prescriptive claims are sometimes simply not recognized, and so, evidence for the one is presumed to be evidence for the other.

But when the ethical relativist does recognize the difference between the two positions, he often tries to construct an argument from the first to the second, using the descriptive claims as evidence for the normative, prescriptive claim of ethical relativism. “Since the Saudis believe in polygamy,
therefore it is right for them,” “Because monogamy is practiced in the United States, it would be wrong to take a second wife (at least while living in the USA).” But can we ever argue legitimately from what is to what ought to be? This is the position known as “naturalism,” which G. E. Moore called the “naturalistic fallacy.” That is, according to Moore, it is a fallacy to argue from what is the case to what ought to be the case.

Did the fact that apartheid was the accepted policy of South Africa make it right? No more than slavery was morally correct in the United States when it was thought to be acceptable, or the Nazi’s treatment of Jews and Gypsies during the Second World War. Other cases of naturalism include the argument that such and such is good because it is new or, alternatively, that it is bad because it is not traditional; that X is good because it is socially approved, or has stood the test of time—whenever, that is, we argue from what is the case to what ought to be the case. Arguments of this form are always fallacious, Moore held, since it is always possible for the facts used as evidence to be perfectly true and yet the conclusion to be false. For example, while it is certainly true that slavery was the accepted policy of the United States in the Eighteenth Century, most of us today would agree that it is not true that slavery was morally justified at that time. All such arguments are fallacious, the evidence simply does not establish the conclusion.

But there are further ambiguities and unclarities in the ethical relativist’s position, and, in order to better analyse the relativist’s claim, we should attempt to reconstruct the argument as carefully and in as much detail as we can. This will enable us to assess its strengths and weaknesses at each stage of the argument. The ethical relativist’s argument seems to be something like this: because different people follow different moral practices they must hold different moral standards or principles, and because different people hold different moral standards or principles, different moral standards or principles are morally right for different people. The argument, in other words, seems to consist of two stages: the argument from different moral practices to different moral principles and another argument from different moral principles to the moral correctness of different moral principles. The ethical relativist’s argument can therefore be schematised its follows.

1. Different people follow different moral practices. (Premise)
2. Therefore, different people hold different moral principles.
3. Therefore, different moral principles are morally right for different people. (Ethical Relativism)
There are really two arguments here, the argument from 1 to 2, and the argument from 2 to 3. We will examine each of the two separately beginning with the first. The first argument claims that it is always and necessarily true that different moral practices imply different moral principles, that is, that wherever different people behave differently, it must be because they believe in different moral principles or standards. Is that always or necessarily true? Sometimes, to be sure, the reason people act differently is that they have different moral principles, but is this always or necessarily so? Or are there other explanations for why people behave differently?

One obvious explanation why people who share the same moral principles behave differently is plain and simple lack of will power. Clearly, we do not always do what we believe we ought to do. The fact that one marital partner engages in extramarital sex while the other declines does not necessarily mean that the one believes in it and the other does not. More likely, they both believe it is wrong but one has momentarily yielded to temptation while the other has not, even, let us suppose, where there was ample opportunity. Here, then, is one counter-example to the first part of the relativist’s argument. Are there others?

Some years ago a plane crashed high in the Andes and the passengers, starving to death, resorted to eating some of their fellow passengers who had died in the crash. These passengers therefore practiced what is known as cannibalism, which the passengers on other airlines do not practice, limited as they are to the usual inflight airline meals. But would we say that the reason these passengers followed different practices is that they hold different moral principles, the first group supporting cannibalism, and the second rejecting it? Obviously not. The only reasonable explanation for this difference in behavior is differences in circumstances. Once the first group of passengers were rescued they did not continue their cannibalism, and were the second group of passengers involved in similar circumstances, they too might well resort to the same emergency cannibalism as the Andes crash victims.

The same may be true generally of the differences in the practices of entire social groups. Some people are appalled when they hear about the traditional Eskimo practice of abandoning their aged parents to starve and freeze to death when they are no longer able to contribute to the work of the group. This sounds horrible because it seems to imply a callous attitude toward human life and especially our elderly parents and grandparents who deserve our love and respect. But when we consider the extremely difficult conditions under which Eskimos lived, we may discover that they love their
elders no less than we do. They do not allow them to starve and freeze to death because they lack humanistic moral principles, but simply out of harsh necessity. Like the Andes crash victims described above, the Eskimos behave differently from their American counterparts because they live in radically different circumstances—not because they hold radically different moral principles. As these conditions change we would expect their behavior to change, as indeed it has. And, by the same token if we were forced into such an extremely harsh environment, we might begin to act as the Eskimos traditionally behaved.

In general, then, differences in moral principles is not the only explanation for differences in moral practices. Now, consider a different sort of case. Some doctors perform abortions; others do not. Why? Is it due to differences in moral standards, as the relativist’s argument suggests, or is there some other explanation? If we ask the doctors themselves, the first will probably tell us that he is willing to perform abortions because he does not feel that the fetus is a human being until birth, or at least until the “third trimester” after conception, while the second will most likely respond that he refuses to perform any abortion because he believes that the fetus is a human being from the moment of conception, or at least after the first trimester. Both of them seem to agree that deliberately killing a human being would be murder and that that is both legally and morally wrong. Where they differ, then, is in their beliefs concerning the metaphysical status of the fetus. Is it a human being or not? This is not itself a moral question, but a metaphysical issue on which moral practice greatly depends. The difference in the behavior of the doctors is not due, then, to differences in moral principles—both believe equally fervently in the sanctity of human life and the absolute moral injunction against murder. The difference consists in differences in their nonmoral beliefs about the world.

More generally, some societies burn suspected witches, others do not; some kill all human twins, others do not; and finally some social groups perform human sacrifices while others do not. How can we explain such radical differences in behavior? Societies burn witches because they believe in witches. That is, they believe in the existence of evil spirits which have the capacity to inhabit and control human beings and that the only way to get the evil spirit out of the human body is to burn the body, driving out the spirit. Certain groups traditionally killed twins because they believed twins would bring misfortune on the entire tribal group. And societies practice human sacrifice because they believe in the existence of gods who demand such
sacrifices and who will bring great misfortune on the community which fails to provide such sacrifices.

What are the moral principles shared by all these groups? And do they differ from our own? They believe that it is their moral duty to do what is necessary to promote the welfare of the community. They believe that life is precious, indeed our most valuable possession. But these are very much the moral principles which we also hold. And, paradoxically, it is precisely because of these moral principles which they share with us that they do those things which we would not do—burn witches, kill twins, or engage in human sacrifice. All these things are done to protect and preserve life. The reason we do not engage in such activities is that we no longer believe in the power of evil spirits to inhabit a human body, or that God demands human sacrifices without which He will punish us.

To see that this is so, we can perform two related thought experiments, as we did above. What if we shared these nonmoral beliefs about the world? And what if they did not? If we believed that the universe was controlled by gods who demanded human sacrifices without which they would cause our crops to fail, disease and famine among our people, what would we do? We would reluctantly have to perform the occasional human sacrifice. Alternatively, what if these people who traditionally practiced human sacrifice became convinced that there were no such gods, or that they were more interested in our good deeds, animal sacrifices, or vegetable offerings than human sacrifices. Surely they would stop the practice of human sacrifice.

Once again, we find upon closer examination of all the facts involved that the degree of difference among people around the world and throughout history on moral issues has been greatly exaggerated and is in fact much less than we had been led to expect.

Sometimes differences in moral behavior are best explained in terms of differences in moral principles, but, as we have seen, these differences can also be explained in terms of differences in will power, differences in the circumstances involved and in terms of differences in the nonmoral beliefs held. Sometimes, too, people who share the same moral principles will act differently because they interpret those principles differently. For some people “Thou shalt not kill” includes capital punishment and warfare, while for others these are allowed as exceptions to the general rule.

In summary, we have considered four counterexamples to the first part of the ethical relativist’s argument. The first part of the argument, you will remember, was that differences in moral behavior always and necessarily
implied differences in the moral principles held. But we have seen that that is not the case. Since the second part of the argument leading to ethical relativism depends on the first part, this is enough to refute the argument as a whole. But let us go on and grant, for purposes of the argument, that differences in moral behavior can be explained in terms of differences in moral principles. After all, we do not want to deny that there are any differences in moral principles. Obviously, such differences exist. The question now is whether that logically implies the ethical relativist position that different moral principles are right for different people. Or, as we schematised this part of the argument earlier,

*Different people hold different moral principles.*

*Therefore, different moral principles are right for different people.*

Does it follow that because people think something is right that it is right? In general, this would seem to be obviously false. Is the world flat because some people think it is? People used to think that malaria was caused by damp air. Does the fact that this was believed make the belief true? Nor does such an inference seem any more plausible in the moral sphere. Was slavery morally right because people thought it was? In all areas of human thought we must recognize the possibility of error. Thinking can be either true or false, correct or incorrect, and if that is so, then it can never logically follow that just because someone thinks something is true that it is true.

Thus, the second part of the ethical relativist’s argument also fails. It does not follow that because different people hold different moral principles that these different moral principles are therefore right for different people. But, of course, the fact that someone’s argument is faulty doesn’t mean that the position they are arguing for is wrong. Since the argument we have just rejected is the primary argument in favor of ethical relativism, we can conclude that there is no good argument to date in favor of ethical relativism and ask whether there are any compelling reasons for rejecting it, that is, arguments against ethical relativism?

Certainly, there is something odd, if not downright contradictory in saying, as the ethical activist is prepared to say, that the same action can be both right and wrong, depending on which person or society you are considering. To say that abortion is morally wrong and not morally wrong doesn’t seem to make any sense at all. As Aristotle pointed out, it amounts to saying nothing. But, of course, the relativist is not uttering such a blatant self-contradiction, for he is saying that abortion is morally wrong for this particular...
An action is said to be right or wrong “relative” to a particular situation, hence the term ethical relativism. And, in general, we do allow that the same thing can be true in one situation and false in another. “Drive slowly in school areas” is applicable during the day but not at night. “Every human being should be free to make the major decisions affecting his or her life” may be valid for rational, sane adults, but does it apply to children, the mentally retarded, or the criminally insane? We say that everyone should pay income tax, though we exclude those below a certain income level.

Nonetheless, in each of these cases there is always a good reason why the rule applies in the one case but not in the other. We drive slowly in school zones to ensure the safety of school children, but since they are only in school during certain hours of the day, the rule is really only applicable during school hours and becomes irrelevant at night, during the weekends, and so on. We don’t, generally, allow any and all exceptions, however—slow down if you feel like it, or have plenty of time, or have children of your own in that particular school. These exceptions are inadmissible, either because they are selfishly motivated or else because they have no rational basis whatever. We allow that those below a certain income level are not assessed income tax for what we consider a good reason, and that reason applies to everyone in that situation. We don’t allow a person to skip IRS payments in a given year because he or she doesn’t want to pay or prefers to use that money to purchase a new computer. The exception must be based on a good reason which applies to everyone in that situation.

But when the ethical relativist argues that abortion is morally wrong in one situation and right in another, what sort of reason is given to justify the changing moral assessment? Generally, it is simply that in the one case the individual happens to believe that abortion is wrong and in the other the person thinks it is morally justifiable.

What is peculiar to ethical relativism is the allowance for differences in behavior for no other reason than differences in opinion concerning principles. Ethical relativism, in other words, is not simply the view, shared by all moral theories, that moral behavior is contextually relative, depending on the application of moral principles, but that the moral principles themselves are culturally and contextually relative. It is simply that in the one case the individual believes abortion is wrong and in the other he thinks it is right. What kind of reason is that? It is true because I say or think it is true and false if I say or think it is false. If I say it is true today and tomorrow change
my mind and say it is false, then it was true when I said it was true and false
when I say it is false.

Sometimes the relativist speaks as though an action can be both morally
right and morally wrong at the same time, but it is difficult to understand
how slavery, for example, could be wrong for us today and right for the
ancient Greeks. If we believe today that slavery is wrong then don’t we have
to say that the ancient Greeks were mistaken in their views on slavery, that it
was wrong in ancient Greece though, unfortunately, they did not realize this.
Sometimes, however, the relativist speaks as though he means that actions
are neither right nor wrong, but that is also hard to understand. Of course, it
is difficult to reach consensus on the morality of abortion, for example, but
surely it is either morally right or wrong, one way or the other, and not both
or neither.

So far, we have seen that the relativist’s argument for his position is
weak, and we have also considered some arguments against his position
which seem fairly strong. Another kind of consideration often used to assess
the strengths and weaknesses of a philosophical position is to see how well it
accords with our other beliefs about the world. Whenever we are considering
whether to accept a theory or to reject it, we have to consider how well it fits
in with our other beliefs.

How well, then, does ethical relativism accord with our basic common
sense assumptions? By accepting ethical relativism, how much would we
have to give up, and is it worth it? First of all, as we have already seen, ethi-
cal relativism conflicts with our strongly held common sense belief that ethi-
cal disputes are genuine disagreements. If you hold abortion is morally
wrong and I say it is morally justifiable, we both assume that there is a con-
ict between our two beliefs, and therefore a genuine disagreement and dis-
pate between us. If abortion is wrong, then you are right and I am mistaken,
and if abortion is right then I am correct in my belief and you are mistaken.
For all our disagreement about abortion, we at least agree that abortion is
either right or wrong, and that therefore only one of us can be correct. But, as
we have seen, this is denied by ethical relativism, which holds that appar-
ently contradictory moral beliefs are either both correct or that neither of
them is correct. It is only in matters of subjective feelings and taste that dif-
ferent responses to the same object do not result in contradiction and con-
flicting disagreement. If you like chocolate ice cream and I do not, there is
no real disagreement between us because we have not made contradictory
claims about the same object. I did not claim that chocolate ice cream is bad;
I said something about myself, that I don’t find it tasty. Nor have you said anything about the ice cream, but have also referred to yourself and your own reaction to chocolate ice cream, that you find it pleasing. But clearly between “I find it tasty” and “You do not find it tasty” there is no contradiction. Both these statements can be true at the same time.

If ethical relativism is true, it therefore follows that ethical disagreements must be understood on the analogy with differences of taste, on the model of liking or disliking chocolate ice cream. But this seems to contradict our most strongly held common sense beliefs about the nature of moral disputes. If you feel strongly that abortion is morally wrong, you do not imagine yourself to be asserting something about your own personal, subjective likes and dislikes; you imagine that you are saying something about the objective world, that killing the human fetus is murder and should be stopped. You feel that I am mistaken in my belief and would like to persuade me accordingly. When we interrogate our ordinary intuitions concerning disagreements on ethical issues, we find that they are ordinarily assumed to be much closer to disagreements we have about things in the objective world, where contradictory opinions cannot both be correct.

But from this, other conflicts emerge between ethical relativism and our ordinary common sense assumptions. If there are no right answers in ethics, then there can never be mistakes made by morals. Nor, by the same token, could we ever discover true or better moral standards, or feel that we had made progress in ethics. But this is contrary to what we ordinarily believe. We usually assume that people in the past were wrong to uphold slavery, and that progress was made when it came to be commonly accepted that slavery was morally wrong. But all these assumptions and ordinary beliefs would have to be given up were we to accept ethical relativism. Is this too high a price to pay?

A final argument against ethical relativism is that it is difficult, if not impossible, for anyone to actually be an ethical relativist. This wouldn’t show that ethical relativism was false, but it would show that no human being could actually be a relativist, and that would surely undermine the doctrine considerably. Perhaps you have already anticipated part of this argument. When we speculate in the abstract concerning those rather more superficial standards of behavior which vary from country to country and which do not, therefore, directly or personally affect us in any way, it is easy to say “live and let live.” What do we care, really, how the natives of Panga Panga greet one another? But when the issue is one which we take more seri-
ously, and when the issue becomes one which affects us daily in a personal and direct way, then it is obviously much more difficult to be tolerant of others’ moral views.

It is very difficult for someone suffering from sexual or racial discrimination to say or think with sincerity that those who support sexual or racial discrimination are just as correct in their views and should be allowed to practice those views just as much as those who oppose such forms of discrimination. Imagine you are the victim of such discrimination and you confront your oppressor who tells you that he has every moral right to oppress you since he is in a position of strength which he occupies precisely because he belongs to a superior race or sex. Now imagine yourself, replying, in all honesty and sincerity, “Well, although I hold a different view, your view is no better or worse than mine, and I certainly would not want to stand in the way of your carrying out what you feel is the morally right thing to do.” Could you do it?

But one can go further and argue that it is impossible to ever be a consistent relativist because of the very assumptions on which ethical relativism depends. The ethical relativist argues that every human being has his or her own moral point of view which he or she feels is correct. This is the basis of the ethical relativist’s plea for tolerance of other’s moral views, for if each of us feels he or she is right and there is no way to resolve disagreements, then what can we do but agree to disagree, live and let live? But it is precisely for this reason that no one can be a sincere thoroughgoing relativist. If I feel that I am right and you take a contrary position, then I have to feel that you are wrong. If I feel that your discrimination against me is wrong and you believe it is morally justified, then, logically and psychologically, I must think that you are mistaken. Or to put it slightly differently, if I personally and emotionally dislike discrimination, especially as it is directed against me, then how can I feel anything but dislike and aversion to your attempts to discriminate against me. If I am a card-carrying Ethical Relativist I may feel deeply ashamed at my failure to carry out my belief in ethical relativism, but I will in practice find myself constantly sinning against my own doctrine. Will the real ethical activist please stand up? If no one is able to stand up, who is left to defend the doctrine and against whom will we direct counter arguments?

Thus far we have examined the principle argument for ethical relativism, as well as major arguments against ethical relativism. The fact remains, however, that ethical relativism continues to be an extremely popular view, and we should say a word or two about the continued popularity of
ethical relativism. If someone rejects ethical relativism, then what is he? An ethical “absolutist.” That doesn’t sound very nice, does it? Why not? An “absolutist” sounds like someone who is dogmatically certain that he is right and everyone else is wrong, someone who is absolutely sure of everything and therefore intolerant of the rights of others to their opinions. If it were true that the ethical relativist is more modest in how much he claims to know and how well he knows it and if he is more tolerant of other’s views than the ethical absolutist, this would certainly be a point in the ethical relativist’s favor. But is this really true?

A person who opposes ethical relativism need not believe that he or she knows what is right and wrong with complete certainty, but only that there is an objective right and wrong which we all try to discover. Similarly, a scientific absolutist need not believe that he or she knows all the answers to every scientific question with complete certainty, stubbornly refusing to consider new evidence or even to contemplate altering one’s position. All the scientific absolutist holds is that scientific theories are either true or false and that there is evidence which at any given moment counts more toward one theory than another, so that it is possible for human beings to assess at any given moment which of several competing theories is the strongest and most convincing. The ethical absolutist may not be sure what to think about abortion, for example. Some arguments seem to weigh heavily against abortion, while other considerations make a convincing case for abortion. Nonetheless, unlike the ethical relativist, the ethical absolutist believes that abortion is either right or wrong, and is therefore committed to continuing the search for the correct answer to this perplexing moral dilemma.

In this respect the ethical relativist is ironically less flexible than the absolutist. The relativist is completely set in his ways, unbending, unchanging. He is convinced that there is no right or wrong answer, and so no amount of new information, reasons, arguments can possibly alter his fixed position. Of course. there are all kinds of ethical absolutists, and some of these may be just as rigid and inflexible as the ethical relativist. But at least it is possible for the ethical absolutist to adopt a more cautious, modest, wait-and-see approach, willing to listen to reasons, open to new information, which is not possible for the ethical relativist.

Nor need the ethical absolutist be less tolerant than the ethical relativist. Again, ethical absolutists can be, and some are, inflexible, intolerant, dogmatic bigots. The point is that the ethical absolutist can be and often is as tolerant as the relativist. The ethical absolutist is not logically committed to
intolerance; his position is consistent with an attitude of tolerance. How so? We do not always or necessarily try to stop or dissuade people from doing what we believe is morally wrong. Suppose you are my neighbor and you see me constantly belittling and humiliating my wife and children. You feel quite clearly that this is wrong, but what do you do about it? Probably nothing. Why?

If you believe that what I am doing is wrong, then you not only think that I am mistaken in my moral beliefs, but that what I am doing is wrong. If you are sincere in your moral beliefs and if you feel that this is an important issue, then, to that extent, you would like me to stop what I am doing, and because you think it is wrong you would like to do what you can to bring these humiliating practices to a stop. And yet you do nothing. Why? Perhaps you are afraid. You don’t want to get involved. But perhaps you have a better reason for not intervening. Perhaps you think that, however wrong I am to humiliate my family, it would be worse for you to interfere in my private life. It is not moral indifference or lack of will power which prevents you from interfering, but a conflict between two moral principles which you hold, one, to prevent the wrong of my humiliating my family and two, to respect my privacy within my own family affairs. In a pluralistic society like ours, we regard it as a positive virtue to allow people a large amount of autonomy over their private lives and within the family. So, now in weighing these conflicting moral obligations, you have decided that it would be better to respect my privacy than to try to prevent my humiliating treatment of my family, or to put it another way, you have decided that it would be worse to invade my privacy and that of my family than it would be to do nothing about my treatment of members of my family.

Thus, in this case you have, at least within my example, taken the position of a tolerant ethical absolutist. You are firmly convinced that what I am doing is wrong, and being sincere and concerned, you would like to do what you can to stop this immoral activity on my part. Nonetheless, on balance, you respect my right within certain limits to do those things which you feel are immoral. In a similar way, some people feel that though abortion is morally wrong it should not be made illegal, that it is better to allow people to decide for themselves, even if they should then decide to do what is immoral and, putting it the other way round, that it would be worse to inhibit freedom of choice than it would be to prevent immoral actions.

But, of course, there are limits to such tolerant behavior. Suppose now that you observe me not only belittling and humiliating my wife and chil-
dren, but brutally beating them as well, so severely in fact that they are on several occasions hospitalized. Now what do you do? This time to do nothing would be morally indefensible, that is, we would do nothing in this situation simply out of fear and indifference which are not very good reasons. But if you should now call in the police, it is not because you no longer respect my right of privacy within the family, but only that now the balance has tipped the other way. Unlike before, it is better to prevent harm than to avoid the wrong of interfering. In all conflicts of duties we have to weigh the lesser of two evils (and the better of two goods). In the first case when I was only belittling my family, most of us would agree that the greater good falls on the side of respecting the privacy of persons, even when he or she is doing what we think is wrong, whereas in the second case, things have gone too far, tipping the scales in favor of interference.

Tolerance, then, is a positive value, consistent with ethical absolutism, but, ironically, it is not for the ethical absolutist an absolute moral value. It is one value among others which must be weighed in each case to see whether it outweights or is outweighed by other values. Ironically, it is the ethical relativist who is an “absolutist” when it comes to the principle of tolerance. For the relativist, a policy of tolerance must always be followed; there is nothing which can modify or offset that one “absolute”. Pro-abortion, anti-abortion; pro-slavery, anti-slavery—all are equally correct and no one therefore has any right to impose his wishes on any other.

But should tolerance, important as it surely is, be an absolute? If you are convinced that child abuse or rape, for example, is morally wrong, then, as suggested before, can you honestly and sincerely say or believe that the person who believes in child abuse and rape is just as correct and as morally justified as you are? And if you feel that the person supporting rape or child abuse is wrong, don’t you feel an obligation to do what you can to prevent that wrong? Thus, absolute tolerance is incompatible with morality and is not a value we would want to uphold.

The alliance which the ethical relativist has tried to establish between ethical relativism and tolerance in what we claim to know ethically therefore appears to be misplaced. Tolerance is compatible with ethical absolutism and, in fact, in many ways, as we have seen, the relativist is ironically less tolerant and modest than the ethical absolutist.