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ETHICS IN A WORLD OF STRANGERS

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CHAPTER FOUR

MORAL DISAGREEMENT

Through Thick and Thin

You don't need to leave home to have disagreements about questions of value. In a crowd of people leaving a movie theater, someone thinks Million Dollar Baby superior to Sideways, but her companion demurs. "How can you respect a movie that tells you that the life of a quadriplegic is so worthless that you ought to kill her if she asks you to?" In a lively discussion after a barroom brawl, some say that the bystander who intervened was courageous, others that he was reckless and should just have called the cops. In a classroom discussion of abortion, one student says that first-trimester abortions are bad for the mother and the fetus, but that they ought to be legal, if the mother chooses. Another thinks that killing a fetus isn't even as bad as killing a grown-up cat. A third claims all abortion is murder. If we are to encourage cosmopolitan engagement, moral conversation between people across societies, we must expect such disagreements: after all, they occur within societies.

But moral conflicts come in different varieties. To begin with, our vocabulary of evaluation is enormously multifarious. Some terms—"good," "ought"—are, as philosophers often put it, rather thin. They express approval, but their application is otherwise pretty unconstrained: good soil, good dog, good argument, good idea, good person. Knowing what the word means doesn't tell you much about what it applies to. Of course, there are certain acts that you can't imagine thinking are good. That's because you can't make sense of approving of them, though not because it's somehow built into the meaning of the word "good" that, say, snatching food from a starving child doesn't count.

Much of our language of evaluation, however, is much "thicker" than this. To apply the concept of "rudeness," for example, you have to think of the act you're criticizing as a breach of good manners or as lacking the appropriate degree of concern for the feelings of others. I say, "Thank you," ironically, when you accidentally step on my foot, implying

that you did it deliberately. That's rude. Thanking a person, without irony, for something that he's done for you isn't. "Courage" is a term of praise. But its meaning is more substantive than a thin term like "right" or "good": to be courageous requires that you do something that strikes us as risky or dangerous, something where you have something to lose. Opening the front door could be courageous: but only if you had agoraphobia or knew that the secret police had rang the doorbell.

Thin concepts are something like placeholders. When notions of right and wrong are actually at work, they're thickly enmeshed in the complications of particular social contexts. In that sense, as the distinguished American political theorist Michael Walzer says, morality starts out thick. It's when you're trying to find points of agreement with others, say, that you start to abstract out the thin concepts that may underlie the thick ones.[1]

Thin concepts seem to be universal; we aren't the only people who have the concepts of right and wrong, good and bad; every society, it seems, has terms that correspond to these thin concepts, too. Even thick concepts like rudeness and courage are ones that you find pretty much everywhere. But there are thicker concepts still that really are peculiar to particular societies. And the most fundamental level of disagreement occurs when one party to a discussion invokes a concept that the other simply doesn't have. This is the kind of disagreement where the struggle is not to agree but just to understand.

Family Matters

Sometimes, familiar values are intertwined with unfamiliar customs and arrangements. People everywhere have ideas about your responsibility to your children, for instance. But who are your children? I grew up in two societies that conceived of family in rather different ways. In part, because these societies—Akan society in Ghana and the English world of my mother's kin—have been in touch with one another for several centuries, these differences are diminishing. Still, an important difference remains.

Consider the Akan idea of the *abusua*. This is a group of people related by common ancestry, who have relations of love and obligation to one another; the closer in time

your shared ancestors, roughly speaking, the stronger the bonds. Sounds, in short, like a family. But there is an important difference between an *abusua* and a family. For your membership in an *abusua* depends only on who your mother is. Your father is irrelevant. If you are a woman, then your children are in your *abusua*, and so are the descendants of your daughters, and their daughters, on to the end of time. Membership in the *abusua* is shared like mitochondrial DNA, passing only through women. So I am in the same *abusua* as my sister's children but not in the same one as my brother's children. And, since I am not related to my father through a woman, he is not a member of my *abusua* either.

In short, the conception of the family in Akan culture is what anthropologists call *matrilineal*. A hundred years ago, in most lives, your mother's brother—your senior maternal uncle or *wofa*—would have played the role a father would have been expected to play in England. He was responsible, with the child's mother, for making sure that his sister's children-—the word is *wofase*—were fed, clothed, and educated. Many married women lived with their brothers, visiting their husbands on a regular timetable. Of course, a man took an interest in his children, but his obligations to his children were relatively less demanding: rather like being an English uncle, in fact.

Visitors are often somewhat surprised that the word that you would most naturally use to refer to your brother or sister—which is *nua*—is also the word for the children of your mother's sisters. And, in fact, people sometimes will tell you, in Ghanaian English, that someone is "my sister, same father, same mother," which you might have thought was a couple of qualifications too many. (If someone tells you that a woman is his junior mother, on the other hand, he's referring to his mother's younger sister.)

When I was a child all this was changing. More men were living with their wives and children and not supporting their sisters' children. But my father still got the school reports of his sister's children, sent them pocket money, discussed, with their mothers, their schooling, paid the bills at the family house of his *abusua*. He also regularly ate with his favorite sister, while his children and wife—that's us—ate together at home.

There are, in short, different ways of organizing family life. Which one makes sense to you will depend, in good measure, on the concepts with which you grew up. As long as a society has a way of assigning responsibilities for the nurture of children that works and makes sense, it seems to me, it would be odd to say that one way was the right way of doing it, and all the others wrong. We feel, rightly, that a father who is delinquent in his child support payments is doing something wrong. Many Asante, especially in the past, would feel the same about a delinquent *wofa*. Once you understand the system, you'll be likely to agree: and it won't be because you've given up any of your basic moral commitments. There are thin, universal values here—those of good parenting—but their expression is highly particular, thickly enmeshed with local customs and expectations and the facts of social arrangements.

Red Peppers on Wednesdays

But there are other local values that scarcely correspond to anything you might recognize as important. My father, for example, wouldn't eat "bush meat," animals killed in the forest. This included venison, and, he used to tell us, when he once ate it by accident in England, his skin broke out in a rash the next day. Had you asked him why he wouldn't eat bush meat, though, he wouldn't have said he didn't like it or that he was allergic to it. He would have told you—if he thought it was any of your business—that it was *akyiwadee* for him, because he was of the clan of the Bush Cow. Etymologically *akyiwadee* means something like "a thing you turn your back on," and, if you had to guess at the translation of it, you would presumably suggest "taboo." That is, of course, a word that came into English from a Polynesian language, where it was used to refer to a class of things that people of certain groups strenuously avoided.

As in Polynesia, in Asante doing one of these forbidden things leaves you "polluted," and there are various remedies, ways of "cleansing" yourself. We all have experience with the sense of revulsion, and the desire to cleanse ourselves, but that doesn't mean that we really have the concept of *akyiwadee*. Because to have that idea—that thick concept—you have to think that there are things that you ought not to do because of your clan membership, or because they are taboo to a god to whom you owe allegiance. Now, you might say that there's a rationale of sorts for a member of the

Bush Cow clan's not eating bush meat. Your clan animal is, symbolically, a relative of yours; so, for you, eating it (and its relatives) is a bit like eating a person. And perhaps this is one rationalization that a member of the clan might offer. But the list of akyiwadee in traditional Asante society far exceeds anything that you can make sense of in this sort of way. One shrine god named Edinkra— mentioned in the 1920s by Captain Rattray, the colonial anthropologist who first wrote extensively about Asante traditions— had among its taboos red peppers on Wednesdays.

Now, I don't claim that you can't learn what *akyiwadee* means: indeed, I hope you pretty much grasp how the word is used on the basis of what I've told you already, and if you read the complete works of Captain Rattray, you'd know a lot more about Akan taboos, certainly enough to grasp the concept. Nevertheless, this isn't an idea that plays any role in your actual thinking. There are acts we avoid that we rather loosely call "taboo," of course: the prohibition on incest, for example. But you don't really think incest is to be avoided because it is taboo. Your thought is exactly the other way round: it's "taboo" because there are good reasons not to do it.

Some *akyiwadee*, like the one that prohibited my father from eating venison, are specific to particular kinds of people, as is evidenced in a proverb that makes a metaphor of the fact:

Nnipa gu ahodoo mmiensa, nanso obiara wd n'akyiwadee:

ohene, adehyee na akoa. Ohene akyiwadee ne akyinnyee, odehyee

dee ne nsamu, na akoa dee ne nkyerasee.

People fall into three kinds, but everyone has his own taboo: the ruler, the royal, and the slave. The ruler's taboo is disagreement, the royal's is disrespect, and the slave's is the revealing of origins.

As a result, even if you were in Asante, many taboos wouldn't affect you, since you don't belong to an Asante clan and don't have obligations to shrine gods. But there are

many things all Asantes “turn their backs on” and would expect everyone else to as well. Given that some of them have to do with contact with menstruating women or men who have recently had sex, they can affect strangers, even if strangers don’t act on them. Once you know about the taboos, they can raise questions as to how you should act. Since, for example, shaking hands with a menstruating woman is taboo to a chief, some visitors to the Asante court have a decision to make about whether to come to a meeting.

I have deliberately not used the word “moral” to describe these taboos. They are certainly values: they guide acts, thoughts, and feelings. They are unlike what we would think of as moral values, however, in at least three ways. First, they don’t always apply to everybody. Only members of the Ekuona clan have the obligation to avoid bush meat. Second, you are polluted if you break a taboo, even if you do it by accident. So, whereas with an offense against morality, “I didn’t mean to do it” counts as a substantial defense, with taboo breaking, the reply must be, “It doesn’t matter what you meant to do. You’re polluted. You need to get clean.” Oedipus was no better off for having broken the incest taboo unknowingly. A final difference between taboos and moral demands is that breaches of them pollute mostly you: they aren’t fundamentally about how you should treat other people; they’re about how you should keep yourself (ritually) clean.

Now, all around the world many people have believed in something like *akyiwadee*, and the analogous term, *tabu* or whatever, is certainly a powerful part of evaluative language. But—at least nowadays—while the avoidance of taboos is still important to people, it isn’t as important as many other sorts of values. That’s partly because, as I said, while breaches of taboo produce pollution, that pollution can usually be ritually cleansed. The laws of kashrut for Orthodox Jews in our country are like this, too: obedience to them is important, and so is a commitment to obeying them if you can. If you break them accidentally, however, the right response is not guilt but the appropriate ritual form of purification. Moral offenses—theft, assault, murder—on the other hand, are not expiated by purification. Now there are historical trends that help explain why a concern with akyiwadee plays a smaller part in contemporary life in my hometown than it would have done when my father was growing up. One reason is that even more

people now are Christian and Muslim, and these taboos are associated with earlier forms of religion. Our earlier religious ideas survive, as I've noted, even in the lives of devout believers in these global faiths. They just have less weight than they had before they were competing with Jehovah and Allah. In the old days, you had reason to fear the wrath of the gods or the ancestors if you broke taboos— that was part of why it was important to make peace with them by cleansing yourself. But these powers have less respect in the contemporary world. (When my Christian sister wanted to protect us from witchcraft, you'll recall, she went to a Muslim.)

Another reason is that the forms of identity—the clan identities, for example—with which they are often associated are just a good deal less significant than they used to be. People still mostly know their clans. And in the past, when you showed up in a strange town in another part of the Akan world, you could have sought hospitality from the local leaders of your clan. Now, however, there are hotels; travel is commoner (so the demands of clan hospitality could easily become oppressive); and clans, like the families of which they are a part, recede in importance anyway when so many people live away from the places where they were born.

Equally important, I think, most people in Kumasi know now that our taboos are local: that strangers do not know what is and is not taboo and that, if they do, they have taboos of their own. So increasingly people think of taboos as "things we don't do." The step from "what we don't do" to "what we happen not to do" can be a small one; and then people can come to think of these practices as the sort of quaint local custom that one observes without much enthusiasm and, in the end, only when it doesn't cause too much fuss.

Gross Points

The *akyiwadee* is, as we've seen, thickly enmeshed in all sorts of customs and factual beliefs (not least the existence of irascible ancestors and shrine gods), and one response to such alien values is just to dismiss them as primitive and irrational. But if that is what they are, then the primitive and the irrational are pervasive here, too. Indeed, the affect, the sense of repugnance that underlies *akyiwadee* is surely

universal: that's one reason it's not difficult to grasp. Many Americans eat pigs but won't eat cats. It would be hard to make the case that cats are, say, dirtier or more intelligent than pigs. And since there are societies where people will eat cats, we know that it is possible for human beings to eat them with pleasure and without danger. Most American meat eaters who refuse to eat cats have only the defense that the very thought of it fills them with disgust. Indeed, all of us have things that we find contact with polluting: touching them makes us feel dirty; eating them would nauseate us. Were likely to run off to wash our hands or wash out our mouths if we come into contact with them. Mostly, when we have these responses, we defend them as rational: cockroaches and rats and other people's saliva or vomit do actually carry diseases, we say; cats and dogs taste horrible. Yet these reactions are not really explained by the stories we tell. Flies carry most of the same risks as cockroaches, but usually produce less "pollution." And people are disgusted by the idea of drinking orange juice that has had a cockroach in it, even if they know that the cockroach was rigorously cleansed of all bacteria by being autoclaved in advance. They're reluctant to eat chocolate shaped like dog feces, even if they know exactly what it is.

Psychologists (notably Paul Rozin, who has conducted many experiments along these lines) think that this capacity for disgust is a fundamental human trait, one that evolved in us because distinguishing between what you will and will not eat is an important cognitive task for an omnivorous species like our own. Disgust goes with nausea, because it is a response that developed to deal with food that we should avoid. But that capacity for disgust, like all our natural capacities, can be built on by culture. Is it the same capacity that makes some men in many cultures feel polluted when they learn they have shaken hands with a menstruating woman? Or that makes most Americans squirm in disgust at the thought of incest? I don't think we yet know. The pervasiveness of these taboo responses does suggest, however, that they draw on something deep in human nature.[2]

Most people in this country, both secular and religious, think that the attitudes of some of their contemporaries to certain sexual acts—masturbation and homosexuality, for instance, or even consensual adult incest—are simply versions of taboos found in many

cultures around the world. In the so-called Holiness Code, at the end of Leviticus, for example, eating animals that have died of natural causes requires you to wash yourself and your clothes, and even then you will be unclean until the evening (Leviticus 17:15-16). Priests, “the sons of Aaron,” are told at Leviticus 22:5-8 that if they touch people or “any swarming thing” that is polluting, they must bathe and wait until sunset before they can eat the “sacred donations.” The same chapters proscribe the consuming of blood, bodily self-mutilation (tattoos, shaving for priests, cutting gashes in one’s flesh, though not, of course, male circumcision), and seeing various of one’s relatives naked, while prescribing detailed rules for certain kinds of sacrifice. For most modern Christians, these regulations are parts of Jewish law that Christ freed people from. But the famous proscriptions of a man’s “lying with a man as with a woman” are to be found alongside these passages, along with commands to avoid incest and bestiality, which most Christians still endorse.[3]

Earlier in Leviticus, we find an extensive set of proscriptions on contact, both direct and indirect, with menstruating women and rules for cleansing oneself from that form of pollution; as well as rules that indicate that male ejaculation is polluting, so that, even after a man has bathed, he is ritually unclean until evening.[4] Like Akan traditions, these rules are embedded in metaphysical beliefs: they are repeatedly said to be laws given by God to Moses for the Israelites, and often they have religious explanations embedded in them. The prohibition on consuming blood is explained thus:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood. And as for Me, I have given it to you on the altar to ransom your lives, for it is the blood that ransoms in exchange for life. Therefore have I said to the Israelites: no living person among you shall consume blood, nor shall the sojourner who sojourns in your midst consume blood.[5]

Leviticus should remind us that appeals to values do not come neatly parceled out according to kinds. You might think that failing to respect your parents is a bad thing, but that it’s bad in a way that’s different from adultery; different, too, from sex with an animal; different, again, from incest with your daughter-in-law. I confess that I do not think sex between men, even if they lie with one another “as with a woman,” is bad at

all. But all of these acts are proscribed in succession by the Holiness Code; in fact (in Leviticus 20:9-13) all of them are deemed worthy of death.

Among those who take them seriously, these prohibitions evoke a deep, visceral response; they're also entangled in beliefs about metaphysical or religious matters. The combination of these two features is what makes them so difficult to discuss with people who share neither the response nor the metaphysics. Yet even with values we do not take seriously, there is something to be hoped for: namely, understanding. Nor do you have to share a value to feel how it might motivate someone. We can be moved by Antigone's resolve to bury her brother's corpse, even if (unlike those Indians and Greeks that Darius scandalized) we couldn't care less about how cadavers are disposed of, and think she shouldn't really, either.

And while taboos can lead to genuine disagreements about what to do, many people readily understand that such values vary from place to place. Asante people largely accept now that others don't feel the power of our taboos; we know that they may have their own. And, most importantly, these local values do not, of course, stop us from also recognizing, as we do, kindness, generosity, and compassion, or cruelty, stinginess, and inconsiderateness— virtues and vices that are recognized widely among human societies.

So, too, scattered among the various abominations in Leviticus we come across, from time to time, appeals to values that are universal and that discipline the demands made by the taboos. Leviticus 19 commands us to leave a share of our crops for the poor, to avoid lying and dissembling, fraud, and theft; not to speak ill of the deaf or put a stumbling block in the way of the blind; not to slander our relatives. Indeed, it makes the impossibly demanding command that "you shall love your fellow man as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18). There are values here that not all of us recognize; there are many we all do.

Terms of Contention

Cosmopolitans suppose that all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation. But they don't suppose, like some universalists, that we

could all come to agreement if only we had the same vocabulary. Despite what they say in Japan, almost every American knows what it is to be polite, a thickish concept. That doesn't mean that we can't disagree about when politeness is on display. A journalist interviews a foreign dictator, someone who is known for his abuses of human rights. She speaks deferentially, frequently calling him Your Excellency. She says, "Some people have suggested that you have political prisoners in your jails," when everybody knows that this is so. "What do you say, Your Excellency, to the accusations of torture by your secret police?" "Nonsense," he replies. "Lies made up by people who want to confuse foreigners about the progress we are making in my country'." She moves on. Is this politeness? Or is it a craven abdication of the journalist's obligation to press for the truth? Can it be both? If it is politeness, is it appropriate, in these circumstances, to be polite? You can imagine such a conversation proceeding for a long while without resolution.

Politeness is a value term from the repertory of manners, which we usually take to be less serious than morals. But this sort of controversy also surrounds the application of more straightforwardly ethical terms—like "brave"—and more centrally moral ones—-like "cruel." Like most terms for virtues and vices, "courage" and "cruelty" are what philosophers call "open-textured": two people who both know what they mean can reasonably disagree about whether they apply in a particular case.[6] Grasping what the words mean doesn't give you a rule that will definitively decide whether it applies in every case that might come along. Nearly half a century ago, the philosopher of law H. L. A. Hart offered as an example of open texture, a bylaw that prohibits "vehicles" in a public park. Does it apply to a two-inch-long toy car in a child's pocket? "Vehicle" has an open texture. There are things to be said on either side. Of course, in the context of the rule, it may be clear that the idea was to stop people from driving around, disturbing the peace. Let the child bring in the toy. But doesn't that rationale suggest that a skateboard is a vehicle? There need be no reason to think that those who made the rule had any answer to this question in mind. Our language works very well in ordinary and familiar cases. Once things get interesting, even people who know the language equally well can disagree.

The open texture of our evaluative language is even more obvious. One of my great-uncles once led a cavalry charge against a machine-gun emplacement, armed with a sword. Brave? Or just foolhardy? (You may have guessed that this uncle was Asante; actually, he was English, fighting against the Ottomans in the First World War. Great-Uncle Fred called his autobiography Life's a Gamble, so you can tell he was willing to take risks.) Aristotle argued that courage involved an *intelligent* response to danger, not just ignoring it. Perhaps, in the circumstances and given his aims, that saber charge was the smartest thing to do. Still, even if we got as full a story as we could ask for about the exact circumstances, you and I might end up disagreeing.

Several years ago, an international parliament of religious leaders issued what they called a "universal declaration of a global ethic." The credo's exhortations had the quality of those horoscopes that seem wonderfully precise while being vague enough to suit all comers. "We must not commit any kind of sexual immorality": a fine sentiment, unless we don't agree about what counts as sexual immorality. "We must put behind us all forms of domination and abuse": but societies that, by our lights, subject women to domination and abuse are unlikely to recognize themselves in that description. They're convinced that they're protecting women's honor and chastity. "We must strive for a just social and economic order, in which everyone has an equal chance to reach full potential as a human being": a Randian will take this to be an endorsement of unfettered capitalism, as a Fabian will take it to be an endorsement of socialism.

And so it goes with our most central values. Is it cruel to kill cattle in slaughterhouses where live cattle can smell the blood of the dead? Or to spank children in order to teach them how to behave? The point is not that we couldn't argue our way to one position or the other on these questions; it's only to say that when we disagree, it won't always be because one of us just doesn't understand the value that's at stake. It's because applying value terms to new cases requires judgment and discretion. Indeed, it's often part of our understanding of these terms that their applications are meant to be argued about. They are, to use another piece of philosopher's jargon, essentially contestable. For many concepts, as W. B. Gallie wrote in introducing the term, "proper use inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper use on the part of users."[7] Evaluative

language, I’ve been insisting, aims to shape not just our acts but our thoughts and our feelings. When we describe past acts with words like “courageous” and “cowardly,” “cruel” and “kind,” we are shaping what people think and feel about what was done—and shaping our understanding of our moral language as well. Because that language is open-textured and essentially contestable, even people who share a moral vocabulary have plenty to fight about.

Fool’s Gold

Consider even the “Golden Rule,” which the leaders of the Parliament of the World’s Religions agreed was the “fundamental principle” on which the global ethic was based: “What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others,” or in positive terms, “What you wish done to yourself, do to others.” Since it is, indeed, the most obvious candidate for a global ethical idea, it is worth, I think, explaining briefly why it doesn’t cut much ice. As we see, the rule famously has two nonequivalent versions. Sometimes, in its more modest and negative version, it urges us not to do unto others what we wouldn’t have done to us; sometimes, in more demanding and positive tones, it commands that we must do to others what we would like done to ourselves. Still, either way, it embodies an attractive idea: when you’re doing things to people, imagine how the world looks from their point of view. And the basic moral sentiment is widespread. “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you”: that’s from Confucius’s Analects 15:23. “This is the sum of duty: do nothing to others that would cause you pain if done to you": that’s from the Mahabharata 5:1517. “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets”: that’s from the King James Bible, Matthew 7:12. But even though some version or other of the rule has broad scriptural sanction, the Golden Rule is not as helpful as it might at first seem.

To see why, notice first that when you do something to someone, what you do can be truly described in infinitely many ways. When it’s described in some of those ways, the person you did it to may be glad you did it; when it’s described in other ways, he may not. Suppose you’re a doctor considering saving the life of a Jehovah’s Witness by giving her a blood transfusion. What you want to do is: save her life. That, of course, is

exactly what you would want done unto you, if your medical situation was the same as hers. It is also, we may suppose, what she wants done unto her. But you also want to do this: give her a blood transfusion. That, too, is what you would want done to you. Unfortunately, it is not what your patient wants. Most Witnesses, you see, interpret Leviticus 3:17—which says, “An everlasting statue for your generations in all your dwelling places, no fat and no blood shall you eat”—as prohibiting blood transfusions. Since obeying the Lord’s commands is more important to her than this earthly life, under this description she’s vehemently opposed to what you want to do. She’d literally rather be dead. The first problem with the Golden Rule, in any of its versions, in practice, is that to apply it I have to know not just why I am doing what I am doing unto others-—the description of the act that matters to me—but also how the act will strike those others.

So what should you do? Your first thought might be that you would be perfectly happy to have the blood transfusion if you were in her situation. Taken that way, the Golden Rule says, “Go ahead.” But what’s her situation? Is it the situation of someone about to die unless she gets a blood transfusion, or the situation of someone whose life can be saved only by disobeying God’s commandments? If I thought that I was going to go to hell if you gave me a blood transfusion, I wouldn’t want it either. Once you look at it that way, the Golden Rule pushes you in the other direction. So, when I think about what I should do unto others, is what matters whether I’d like it done to me with my actual values and beliefs, or is what matters whether I’d like it done to me if I had their values and beliefs?

Unfortunately, I think the answer is: neither. Suppose the blood came from an African American and your patient was a racist— are you supposed to ask what you would like done to you if you were a racist? Somehow, I can’t imagine that’s what Confucius or Jesus had in mind. But it’s not just the fact that racism is mistaken that makes the difference. I think that the Witness’s interpretation of Leviticus is wrong. Leviticus 3 is clearly about eating meat that has been prepared for sacrifice to God; verse 17 is underlining the point that the fat should be burned and the blood should have been cast around the altar. In context, I think it’s clear that putting blood that is the free gift of another person into your veins in order to save your life just isn’t “eating blood.”

Nevertheless, I still think the fact that she doesn't want the blood is important, even though it wouldn't be important to me.

I don't have a clear answer as to why this is so. Sometimes, when I'm asking, as I think one often should, "How would I like it if they did that to me?" I imagine myself sharing the beliefs and values of the other person; but sometimes I don't. Suppose my patient thinks that Canadian drugs are inferior to American ones. He's not crazy. There's been an organized campaign, directed by apparently responsible people, to persuade him of this. I can give him one of two pills, one cheap and Canadian, one expensive and made in the USA. I am completely confident that their medical effects are equivalent. Should I offer him a choice? I'm not sure. But it won't help to ask what I would want done to me in those circumstances, unless I know whether the circumstances include having this mistaken belief.

These problems are part of a general difficulty. Immanuel Kant argued that whenever you were trying to pick the right thing to do, you should identify a universal principle on which to act (he called it a "maxim"), and then ask, roughly, whether you would be happy if everyone had to act on that maxim. So he thought, for example, that you shouldn't break your promises just because it suits you, because you couldn't want everybody to do this; if all did, no one would believe you when you made a promise. This is called "universalizing" the maxim. But it can be very hard to identify what maxim you are acting on, especially given that, as I shall argue in the next chapter, it is often much clearer to us what we should do than why.

The idea behind the Golden Rule is that we should take other people's interests seriously, take them into account. It suggests that we learn about other people's situations, and then use our imaginations to walk a while in their moccasins. These are aims we cosmopolitans endorse. It's just that we can't claim that the way is easy.

Which Values Matter Most?

There is yet a third way of disagreeing about values. Even if we share a value language, and even if we agree on how to apply it to a particular case, we can disagree about the weight to give to different values. Confucius, for example, in the *Analects*, recommends

that a son respect his parents. A *chun tzu* (or, as it is often translated, “a gentleman”) should be generous to those who have done well by him and avoid vindictiveness to those who have done him injury; he should avoid avarice and not let self-interest get in the way of doing what is right. He should be courageous, wise, keep his word. Summarized in this, no doubt, simplistic way, Confucius can sound uncannily like Polonius (and equally banal). But the fact that we share these values with him doesn’t mean that we will always agree with him about what we ought to think and feel. Confucius placed a great deal more weight on obedience to authority, for example, than most of us would. The result is that sometimes Confucius would clearly respond to the demands of the many values we both recognize in ways different from us. We may all agree that it would be better, if we can, not to marry a spouse our parents dislike, but most Westerners also think that love could justifiably lead us to disobey them if they tried to get in the way of our marrying the man or woman of our dreams. In the magical second scene of Act II of Romeo and Juliet, Juliet represents the issue as one of giving up names: she wants Romeo to “deny thy father and refuse his name”; she offers that she will “no longer be a Capulet.”

’Tis but thy name that is my enemy;

Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.

. . . Romeo, doff thy name,

And for thy name which is no part of thee

Take all myself.

Confucius would surely respond that Juliet, in speaking of their connection to their families as if it were a matter of mere convention—just names, idle words—covers up the fact that she wants to tear the most powerful natural moral bond, the tie that binds parents irrevocably to their children.

But such conflicts among shared values can take place within a single society—indeed, within a single human heart. Hegel famously said that tragedy involved the clash not between good and evil but between two goods. Agamemnon, as commander of the Greek army, had to choose between the interests of the Trojan expedition and his devotion to his wife and daughter. Such dilemmas are a mainstay of imaginative fiction, but clashes among our own values, if usually less exalted, are an everyday occurrence.

Most people will agree that there is something unfair about punishing people for doing something that they couldn't have been expected to know was wrong. Many tax laws are extremely hard to understand; even after taking good advice from a reputable accountant, you can end up in trouble. If you haven't paid enough tax as a result, you'll be charged a penalty. Surely that's unfair, according to the principle I just enunciated. The question is whether it's unfair enough to change the law. People can disagree. After all, there's something to be said for keeping down the costs of enforcing the tax laws. Efficiency, in short, is a value, too. And if you had a rule that said that you wouldn't be charged a penalty if you had made a good faith effort to apply the tax laws as you understood them, then the courts would be full of people trying to prove that they'd made such a good faith effort. You'd probably even tempt some people to pretend they'd made a good faith effort, thus creating a new moral hazard in our tax laws. Disputes about whether tax laws are just can get quite contentious in America; but there are even more serious cases where values come into conflict.

Take criminal punishment. No reasonable person thinks that it's a good thing to punish innocent people. But we all know that human institutions are imperfect, that our knowledge is always fallible, and that juries are not free from prejudice. So we know that sometimes innocent people will be punished. That would seem like an argument for abandoning criminal punishment; but, of course, we also think that it's important to punish the guilty, not least because we fear that there'd be a lot more crime if we didn't. Here again, we may be unable to agree on how to strike the balance between avoiding the injustice of punishing the innocent and other values, even though we agree on what other values are at stake: security of people and property, justice, retribution . . . there's a long list. This is one source of disagreement about capital punishment. The legal

scholar Charles Black argued that "caprice and mistake" are inevitable in capital trials and that killing an innocent person was too important a mistake to risk.[8] Many proponents of capital punishment believe it's important to punish those who deserve to die; important enough, in fact, that we must, regretfully, accept that we will sometimes do this great wrong. Not to do the right thing in the cases where we punish the guilty, they think, would be a greater wrong. So you can find people on either side of the capital-punishment debate who share the same values, but weight them differently.

Disputing with Strangers

We've identified three kinds of disagreement about values: we can fail to share a vocabulary of evaluation; we can give the same vocabulary different interpretations; and we can give the same values different weights. Each of these problems seems more likely to arise if the discussion involves people from different societies. Mostly we share evaluative language with our neighbors, you might think. And while evaluation is essentially contestable, the range of disagreement will usually be wider—will it not?—when people from different places are trying to come to a shared evaluation. Maybe you and I won't always agree about what's polite. Still, at least its politeness we're disagreeing about. Other societies will have words that behave roughly like our word "polite" and will have something like the idea of "good manners," but an extra level of difference will arise from the fact that this thick vocabulary of evaluation is embedded in different ways of life. And, finally, we know that one way in which societies differ is in the relative weight they put on different values.

In the Arab world, and in much of Central and South Asia, there are societies in which men believe that their honor is tied up with the chastity of their sisters, their daughters, and their wives. Now, men here, too, feel shamed, dishonored, when their wives or daughters are raped. But, unless they come from one of those honor-based societies, they aren't likely to think that the solution is to punish these women. We understand the reflected glory of the achievements of our relatives, and we know that with the possibility of pride comes the option of shame. Yet family honor is not as important to us now as it clearly is, and was, to others. So you might conclude that cross-cultural

conversations about values are bound to end in disagreement; indeed, you might fear that they would inflame conflict rather than creating understanding.

There are three problems with this conclusion. First, we can agree about what to do even when we don't agree why. Second, we exaggerate the role of reasoned argument in reaching or failing to reach agreements about values. And, third, most conflicts don't arise from warring values in the first place. I'll defend these claims in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5
THE PRIMACY OF PRACTICE

Local Agreements

Among the Asante, you will be glad to hear, incest between brothers and sisters and parents and children is shunned as akyiwadee. You can agree with an Asante that it's wrong, even if you don't accept his explanation of why. If my interest is in discouraging theft, I needn't worry that one person might refrain from theft because she believes in the Golden Rule; another because of her conception of personal integrity; a third because she thinks God frowns on it. I've said that value language helps shape common responses of thought, action, and feeling. But when the issue is what to do, differences in what we think and feel can fall away. We know from our own family lives that conversation doesn't start with agreement on principles. Who but someone in the grip of a terrible theory would want to insist on an agreement on principles before discussing which movie to go to, what to have for dinner, when to go to bed?

Indeed, our political coexistence, as subjects or citizens, depends on being able to agree about practices while disagreeing about their justification. For many long years, in medieval Spain under the Moors and later in the Ottoman Near East, Jews and Christians of various denominations lived under Muslim rule. This modus vivendi was possible only because the various communities did not have to agree on a set of universal values. In seventeenth-century Holland, starting roughly in the time of Rembrandt, the Sephardic Jewish community began to be increasingly well integrated

into Dutch society, and there was a great deal of intellectual as well as social exchange between Christian and Jewish communities. Christian toleration of Jews did not depend on express agreement on fundamental values. Indeed, these historical examples of religious toleration—you might even call them early experiments in multiculturalism—should remind us of the most obvious fact about our own society.

Americans share a willingness to be governed by the system set out in the U. S. Constitution. But that does not require anyone to agree to any particular claims or values. The Bill of Rights tells us, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . . Yet we don't need to agree on what values underlie our acceptance of the First Amendment's treatment of religion. Is it religious toleration as an end in itself? Or is it a Protestant commitment to the sovereignty of the individual conscience? Is it prudence, which recognizes that trying to force religious conformity on people only leads to civil discord? Or is it skepticism that any religion has it right? Is it to protect the government from religion? Or religion from the government? Or is it some combination of these, or other, aims?

Cass Sunstein, the American legal scholar, has written eloquently that our understanding of Constitutional law is a set of what he calls "incompletely theorized agreements."1 People mostly agree that it would be wrong for the Congress to pass laws prohibiting the building of mosques, for example, without agreeing exactly as to why. Many of us would, no doubt, mention the First Amendment (even though we don't agree about what values it embodies). But others would ground their judgment not in any particular law but in a conception, say, of democracy or in the equal citizenship of Muslims, neither of which is explicitly mentioned in the Constitution. There is no agreed-upon answer—and the point is there doesn't need to be. We can live together without agreeing on what the values are that make it good to live together; we can agree about what to do in most cases, without agreeing about why it is right.

I don't want to overstate the claim. No doubt there are widely shared values that help Americans live together in amity. But they certainly don't live together successfully because they have a shared theory of value or a shared story as to how to bring "their"

values to bear in each case. They each have a pattern of life that they are used to; and neighbors who are, by and large, used to them. So long as this settled pattern is not seriously disrupted, they do not worry over-much about whether their fellow citizens agree with them or their theories about how to live. Americans tend to have, in sum, a broadly liberal reaction when they do hear about their fellow citizens' doing something that they would not do themselves: they mostly think it is not their business and not the government's business either. And, as a general rule, their shared American-ness matters to them, although many of their fellow Americans are remarkably unlike themselves. It's just that what they do share can be less substantial than we're inclined to suppose.

Changing Our Minds

It's not surprising, then, that what makes conversation across boundaries worthwhile isn't that we're likely to come to a reasoned agreement about values. I don't say that we can't change minds, but the reasons we exchange in our conversations will seldom do much to persuade others who do not share our fundamental evaluative judgments already. (Remember: the same goes, mutatis mutandis, for factual judgments.)

When we offer judgments, after all, it's rarely because we have applied well-thought-out principles to a set of facts and deduced an answer. Our efforts to justify what we have done—or what we plan to do—are typically made up after the event, rationalizations of what we have decided intuitively. And a good deal of what we intuitively take to be right, we take to be right just because it is what we are used to. If you live in a society where children are spanked, you will probably spank your children. You will believe that it is a good way to teach them right from wrong and that, despite the temporary suffering caused by a beating, they will end up better off for it. You will point to the wayward child and say, sotto voce, that his parents do not know how to discipline him; you will mean that they do not beat him enough. You will also, no doubt, recognize that there are people who beat their children too hard or too often. So you will recognize that beating a child can sometimes be cruel.

Much the same can be said about the practice of female genital cutting, to return to a previous example. If you've grown up taking it for granted as the normal thing to do, you will probably respond at first with surprise to someone who thinks it is wrong. You will offer reasons for doing it—that unmodified sexual organs are unaesthetic; that the ritual gives young people the opportunity to display courage in their transition to adulthood; that you can see their excitement as they go to their ceremony, their pride when they return. You will say that it is very strange that someone who has not been through it should presume to know whether or not sex is pleasurable for you. And, if someone should try to force you to stop from the outside, you may decide to defend the practice as an expression of your cultural identity. But this is likely to be as much a rationalization as are the arguments of your critics. They say it is mutilation, but is that any more than a reflex response to an unfamiliar practice? They exaggerate the medical risks. They say that female circumcision demeans women, but do not seem to think that male circumcision demeans men.

I am not endorsing these claims, or celebrating the argumentative impasse, or, indeed, the poverty of reason in much discussion within and across cultures. But let's recognize this simple fact: a large part of what we do we do because it is just what we do. You get up in the morning at eight-thirty. Why that time? You have coffee and cereal. Why not porridge? You send the kids to school. Why not teach them at home? You have to work. Why that job, though? Reasoning—by which I mean the public act of exchanging stated justifications—comes in not when we are going on in the usual way, but when we are thinking about change. And when it comes to change, what moves people is often not an argument from a principle, not a long discussion about values, but just a gradually acquired new way of seeing things.

My father, for example, came from a society in which neither women nor men were traditionally circumcised. Indeed, circumcision was akyiwadee; and since chiefs were supposed to be unblemished, circumcision was a barrier to holding royal office. Nevertheless, as he tells us in his autobiography, he decided as a teenager to have himself circumcised.

As was the custom in those happy days, the young girls of Adum would gather together in a playing field nearby on moonlight nights to regale themselves by singing traditional songs and dancing from about 7 PM until midnight each day of the week.

. .. On one such night, these girls suddenly started a new song that completely bowled us over: not only were the words profane in the extreme, but they also constituted the most daring challenge to our manhood and courage ever flung at us. More than that, we were being invited to violate an age-old tradition of our ancestors, long respected among our people, namely the taboo on circumcision. Literally translated the words were:

“An uncircumcised penis is detestable, and those who are uncircumcised should come for money from us so that they can get circumcised. We shall never marry the uncircumcised.”[2]

To begin with, my father and his friends thought the girls would relent. But they were wrong. And so, after consultation with his mates, my father found himself a *wansam*—a Muslim circumcision specialist—and had the operation performed. (It was, he said, the most painful experience of his life and, if he’d had it to do again, he would have refrained. He did not, of course, have the advantage of the preparation, the companionship of boys of his own age, and the prestige of suffering bravely that would have come if the practice had been an Akan tradition.)

My father offered a reason for this decision: he and his friends conceded that “as our future sweethearts and wives, they were entitled to be heard in their plea in favor of male circumcision, even though they were not prepared to go in for female circumcision, which was also a taboo among our people." This explanation invites a question, however. Why did these young women, in the heart of Asante, decide to urge the young men of Adum to do what was not just untraditional but taboo? One possibility is that circumcision somehow became identified in their minds with being modern. If that was the point, my father would have been sympathetic. He was traditional in some ways; but like many people in Kumasi in the early twentieth century, he was also excited by a

modern world that was bringing new music, new technology, new possibilities. To volunteer for circumcision in his society he surely had not just to hear the plea of the young women of Adum but to understand—and agree with—the impulse behind it. And, as I say, it may have been exactly the fact that it was untraditional that made it appealing. Circumcision—especially because it carried with it exclusion from the possibilities of traditional political office— became a way of casting his lot with modernity.

This new fashion among the young people of Adum was analogous to, if more substantial than, the change in taste that has produced a generation of Americans with piercings and tattoos. And that change was not simply the result of argument and debate, either (even though, as anyone who has argued with a teenager about a pierced belly button will attest, people on both sides can come up with a whole slew of arguments). There's some social- psychological truth in the old Flanders & Swann song "The Reluctant Cannibal," about a young "savage" who pushes away from the table and declares, "I won't eat people. Eating people is wrong." His father has all the arguments, such as they are. ("But people have always eaten people, / What else is there to eat? / If the Juju had meant us not to eat people, / He wouldn't have made us of meat!") The son, though, just repeats his newfound conviction: Eating people is wrong. He's just sure of it, he'll say so again and again, and he'll win the day by declamation.

Or take the practice of foot-binding in China, which persisted for a thousand years—and was largely eradicated within a generation. The anti-foot-binding campaign, in the 1910s and 1920s, did circulate facts about the disadvantages of bound feet, but those couldn't have come as news to most people. Perhaps more effective was the campaign's emphasis that no other country went in for the practice; in the world at large, then, China was "losing face" because of it. Natural-foot societies were formed, with members forswearing the practice and further pledging that their sons would not marry women with bound feet. As the movement took hold, scorn was heaped on older women with bound feet, and they were forced to endure the agonies of unbinding. What had been beautiful became ugly; ornamentation became disfigurement. (The success of the anti-foot-binding campaign was undoubtedly a salutary development, but it was not without

its victims. Think of some of the last women whose feet were bound, who had to struggle to find husbands.) The appeal to reason alone can explain neither the custom nor its abolition.

So, too, with other social trends. Just a couple of generations ago, in most of the industrialized world, most people thought that middle-class women would ideally be housewives and mothers. If they had time on their hands, they could engage in charitable work or entertain one another; a few of them might engage in the arts, writing novels, painting, performing in music, theater, and dance. But there was little place for them in the "learned professions"— as lawyers or doctors, priests or rabbis; and if they were to be academics, they would teach young women and probably remain unmarried. They were not likely to make their way in politics, except perhaps at the local level. And they were not made welcome in science. How much of the shift away from these assumptions is the result of arguments? Isn't a significant part of it just the consequence of our getting used to new ways of doing things? The arguments that kept the old pattern in place were not-—to put it mildly—terribly good. If the reasons for the old sexist way of doing things had been the problem, the women's movement could have been done within a couple of weeks. There are still people, I know, who think that the ideal life for any woman is making and managing a home. There are more who think that it is an honorable option. Still, the vast majority of Westerners would be appalled at the idea of trying to force women back into these roles. Arguments mattered for the women who made the women's movement and the men who responded to them. This I do not mean to deny. But their greatest achievement has been to change our habits. In the 1950s, if a college-educated woman wanted to go to law or business school, the natural response was "Why?" Now the natural response is "Why not?"

Or consider another example: in much of Europe and North America, in places where a generation ago homosexuals were social outcasts and homosexual acts were illegal, lesbian and gay couples are increasingly being recognized by their families, by society, and by the law. This is true despite the continued opposition of major religious groups and a significant and persisting undercurrent of social disapproval. Both sides make arguments, some good, most bad, if you apply a philosophical standard of reasoning.

But if you ask the social scientists what has produced this change, they will rightly not start with a story about reasons. They will give you a historical account that concludes with a sort of perspectival shift. The increasing presence of “openly gay” people in social life and in the media has changed our habits. Over the last thirty or so years, instead of thinking about the private activity of gay sex, many Americans started thinking about the public category of gay people. Even those who continue to think of the sex with disgust now find it harder to deny these people their respect and concern (and some of them have learned, as we all did with our own parents, that it’s better not to think too much about other people’s sex lives anyway).

Now, I don’t deny that all the time, at every stage, people were talking, giving each other reasons to do things: accept their children, stop treating homosexuality as a medical disorder, disagree with their churches, come out. Still, the short version of the story is basically this: people got used to lesbians and gay people. I am urging that we should learn about people in other places, take an interest in their civilizations, their arguments, their errors, their achievements, not because that will bring us to agreement, but because it will help us get used to one another. If that is the aim, then the fact that we have all these opportunities for disagreement about values need not put us off. Understanding one another may be hard; it can certainly be interesting. But it doesn’t require that we come to agreement.

Fighting for the Good

I’ve said we can live in harmony without agreeing on underlying values (except, perhaps, the cosmopolitan value of living together). It works the other way, too: we can find ourselves in conflict when we do agree on values. Warring parties are seldom at odds because they have clashing conceptions of “the good.” On the contrary, conflict arises most often when two peoples have identified the same thing as good. The fact that both Palestinians and Israelis—in particular, that both observant Muslims and observant Jews—-have a special relation to Jerusalem, to the Temple Mount, has been a reliable source of trouble. The problem isn’t that they disagree about the importance of Jerusalem: the problem is exactly that they both care for it deeply and, in part, for the same reasons. Muhammad, in the first years of Islam, urged his followers to turn toward

Jerusalem in prayer because he had learned the story of Jerusalem from the Jews among whom he lived in Mecca. Nor (as we shall see in chapter 9) is it an accident that the West's fiercest adversaries among other societies tend to come from among the most Westernized of the group*. Mon semblable mon frere*? Only if the *frere* you have in mind is Cain. We all know now that the foot soldiers of Al Qaeda who committed the mass murders at the Twin Towers and the Pentagon were not Bedouins from the desert; not unlettered fellahin.

Indeed, there's a wider pattern here. Who in Ghana excoriated the British and built the movement for independence? Not the farmers and the peasants. Not the chiefs. It was the Western-educated bourgeoisie. And when in the 1950s Kwame Nkrumah— who went to college in Pennsylvania and lived in London—created a nationalist mass movement, at its core were soldiers who had returned from fighting a war in the British army, urban market women who traded Dutch prints, trade unionists who worked in industries created by colonialism, and the so-called veranda boys, who had been to colonial secondary schools, learned English, studied history and geography in textbooks written in England. Who led the resistance to the British Raj? An Indian-born South African lawyer, trained in the British courts, whose name was Gandhi; an Indian named Nehru who wore Savile Row suits and sent his daughter to an English boarding school; and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, who joined Lincoln's Inn in London and became a barrister at the age of nineteen.

In Shakespeare's Tempest, Caliban, the original inhabitant of an island commandeered by Prospero, roars at his domineering colonizer, "You taught me language and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse." It is no surprise that Prospero's "abhorred slave" has been a figure of colonial resistance for literary nationalists all around the world. And in borrowing from Caliban, they have also borrowed from Shakespeare. Prospero has told Caliban,

> When thou didst not, savage,
>
> Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like

> A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
>
> With words that made them known.

Of course, one of the effects of colonialism was not only to give many of the natives a European language, but also to help shape their purposes. The independence movements of the post-1945 world that led to the end of Europe's African and Asian empires were driven by the rhetoric that had guided the Allies' own struggle against Germany and Japan: democracy, freedom, equality. This wasn't a conflict between values. It was a conflict of interests couched in terms of the same values.

The point applies as much within the West as elsewhere. Americans disagree about abortion, many vehemently. They couch this conflict in a language of conflicting values: they are pro-life or pro-choice. But this is a dispute that makes sense only because each side recognizes the very values the other insists upon. The disagreement is about their significance. Both sides respect something like the sanctity of human life. They disagree about such things as why human life is so precious and where it begins. Whatever you want to call those disagreements, it's just a mistake to think that either side doesn't recognize the value at stake here. And the same is true about choice: Americans are not divided about whether it's important to allow people, women and men, to make the major medical choices about their own bodies. They are divided about such questions as whether an abortion involves two people—both fetus and mother—or three people, adding in the father, or only one. Furthermore, no sane person on either side thinks that saving human lives or allowing people medical autonomy is the only thing that matters.

Some people will point to disputes about homosexuality and say that there, at least, there really is a conflict between people who do and people who don't regard homosexuality as a perversion. Isn't that a conflict of values? Well, no. Most Americans, on both sides, have the concept of perversion: of sexual acts that are wrong because their objects are inappropriate objects of sexual desire. But not everyone thinks that the fact that an act involves two women or two men makes it perverted. Not everyone who

thinks these acts are perverse thinks they should be illegal. Not everyone who thinks they should be illegal thinks that gay and lesbian people should be ostracized. What is at stake, once more, is a battle about the meaning of perversion, about its status as a value, and about how to apply it. It is a reflection of the essentially contestable character of perversion as a term of value. When one turns from the issue of criminalization of gay sex—which is, at least for the moment, unconstitutional in the United States—to the question of gay marriage, all sides of the debate take seriously issues of sexual autonomy, the value of the intimate lives of couples, the meaning of family, and, by way of discussions of perversion, the proper uses of sex.

What makes these conflicts so intense is that they are battles over the meaning of the same values, not that they oppose one value, held exclusively by one side, with another, held exclusively by their antagonists. It is, in part, because we have shared horizons of meaning, because these are debates between people who share so many other values and so much else in the way of belief and of habit, that they are as sharp and as painful as they are.

Winners and Losers

But the disputes about abortion and gay marriage divide Americans bitterly most of all because they share a society and a government. They are neighbors and fellow citizens. And it is laws governing all of them that are in dispute. What's at stake are their bodies or those of their mothers, their aunts, their sisters, their daughters, their wives, and their friends; those dead fetuses could have been their children or their children's friends.

We should remember this when we think about international human rights treaties. Treaties are law, even when they are weaker than national law. When we seek to embody our concern for strangers in human rights law and when we urge our government to enforce it, we are seeking to change the world of law in every nation on the planet. We have outlawed slavery not just domestically but in international law. And in so doing we have committed ourselves, at a minimum, to the desirability of its eradication everywhere. This is no longer controversial in the capitals of the world. No

one defends enslavement. But international treaties define slavery in ways that arguably include debt bondage; and debt bondage is a significant economic institution in parts of South Asia. I hold no brief for debt bondage. Still, we shouldn't be surprised if people whose income and whose style of life depend upon it are angry. Given that we have neighbors—even if only a few—who think that the fact that abortion is permitted in the United States turns the killing of the doctors who perform them into an act of heroism, we should not be surprised that there are strangers—even if only a few—whose anger turns them to violence against us.

I do not fully understand the popularity among Islamist movements in Egypt, Algeria, Iran, and Pakistan of a high-octane anti- Western rhetoric. But I do know one of its roots. It is, to use suitably old-fashioned language, "the woman question." There are Muslims, many of them young men, who feel that forces from outside their society—forces that they might think of as Western or, in a different moment, American—are pressuring them to reshape relations between men and women. Part of that pressure, they feel, comes from our media. Our films and our television programs are crammed with indescribable indecency. Our fashion magazines show women without modesty, women whose presence on many streets in the Muslim world would be a provocation, they think, presenting an almost irresistible temptation to men. Those magazines influence publications in their own countries, pulling them inevitably in the same direction. We permit women to swim almost naked with strange men, which is our business; but it is hard to keep the news of these acts of immodesty from Muslim women and children or to protect Muslim men from the temptations they inevitably create. As the Internet spreads, it will get even harder, and their children, especially their girls, will be tempted to ask for these freedoms too. Worse, they say, we are now trying to force our conception of how women and men should behave upon them. We speak of women's rights. We make treaties enshrining these rights. And then we want their governments to enforce them.[3]

Like many people in every nation, I support those treaties, of course; I believe that women, like men, should have the vote, should be entitled to work outside their homes, should be protected from the physical abuse of men, including their fathers, brothers,

and husbands. But I also know that the changes that these freedoms would bring will change the balance of power between men and women in everyday life. How do I know this? Because I have lived most of my adult life in the West as it has gone through the latter phases of just such a transition, and I know that the process is not yet complete.

The recent history of America does show that a society can radically change its attitudes—and more importantly, perhaps, its habits—about these issues over a single generation. But it also suggests that some people will stay with the old attitudes, and the whole process will take time. The relations between men and women are not abstractions: they are part of the intimate texture of our everyday lives. We have strong feelings about them, and we have inherited many received ideas. Above all, we have deep habits about gender. A man and a woman go out on a date. Our habit is that, even if the woman offers, the man pays. A man and a woman approach an elevator door. The man steps back. A man and a woman kiss in a move theater. No one takes a second look. Two men walk hand in hand in the high street. People are embarrassed. They hope their children don't see. They don't know how to explain it to them.

Most Americans are against gay marriage, conflicted about abortion, and amazed (and appalled) that a Saudi woman can't get a driver's license. But my guess is that they're not as opposed to gay marriage as they were twenty years ago. Indeed, twenty years ago, most Americans would probably just have thought the whole idea ridiculous. On the other hand, those Americans who are in favor of recognizing gay marriages probably don't have a simple set of reasons why. It just seems right to them, probably, in the way that it just seems wrong to those who disagree. (And probably they're thinking not about couples in the abstract but about Jim and John or Jean and Jane.) The younger they are, the more likely it is that they think that gay marriage is fine. And if they don't, it will often be because they have had religious objections reinforced regularly through life in church, mosque, or temple.

I am a philosopher. I believe in reason. But I have learned in a life of university teaching and research that even the cleverest people are not easily shifted by reason alone—and that can be true even in the most cerebral of realms. One of the great savants of the

postwar era, John von Neumann, liked to say, mischievously, that “in mathematics you don’t understand things, you just get used to them.” In the larger world, outside the academy, people don’t always even care whether they seem reasonable. Conversation, as I’ve said, is hardly guaranteed to lead to agreement about what to think and feel. Yet we go wrong if we think the point of conversation is to persuade, and imagine it proceeding as a debate, in which points are scored for the Proposition and the Opposition. Often enough, as Faust said, in the beginning is the deed: practices and not principles are what enable us to live together in peace. Conversations across boundaries of identity—whether national, religious, or something else—begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own. So I’m using the word “conversation” not only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and the ideas of others. And I stress the role of the imagination here because the encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves. Conversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it’s enough that it helps people get used to one another.