Of Cannibals, Kings and Culture: The Problem of Ethnocentricity

By ADAM ETINSON

In August of 1563, Michel de Montaigne, the famous French essayist, was introduced to three Brazilian cannibals who were visiting Rouen, France, at the invitation of King Charles the Ninth. The three men had never before left Brazil, had just been subjected to a long interrogation by the king (who was 13 years old at the time), and if they had not already contracted some dangerous European illness, they were surely undergoing a rather severe case of culture shock. Despite this, they still had enough poise to lucidly respond to Montaigne’s questions about what they thought of their new surroundings.

The observations shared by the native Brazilians have a certain comical quality. Because they looked on French society with such fresh eyes, their observations make the familiar seem absurd. But they are also morally revealing. First, the Brazilians expressed surprise that “so many tall, bearded men, all strong and well armed” (i.e., the king’s guard) were willing to take orders from a small child: something that would have been unthinkable in their own society. And second, the Brazilians were shocked by the severe inequality of French citizens, commenting on how some men “were gorged to the full with things of every sort” while others “were beggars at their doors, emaciated with hunger and poverty.” Since the Brazilians saw all human beings “as halves of one another… they found it strange that these poverty-stricken halves should suffer such injustice, and that they did not take the others by the throat or set fire to their houses.”

Montaigne records these observations in an essay entitled, “Des Cannibales.” Well ahead of its time, the essay challenges the haughty denigration of cannibals that was so common among Montaigne’s contemporaries, but not by arguing that cannibalism itself is a morally acceptable practice. Instead, Montaigne makes the more provocative claim that, as barbaric as these Brazilian cannibals may be, they are not nearly as barbaric as 16th-century Europeans themselves. To make his case, Montaigne cites various evidence: the wholesome simplicity and basic nobility of native Brazilian life; the fact that some European forms of punishment — which involved feeding people to dogs and pigs while they were still alive — were decidedly more horrendous than the native Brazilian practice of eating one’s enemies after they are dead; and the humane, egalitarian character of the Brazilians’ moral sensibility, which was on display in their recorded observations.

The fact that, despite all this, 16th-century Western Europeans remained so deeply convinced of their own moral and intellectual superiority was, to Montaigne, evidence of a more general phenomenon. He writes:

We all call barbarous anything that is contrary to our own habits. Indeed we seem to have no other criterion of truth and reason than the type and kind of opinions and customs current in the land where we live. There we always see the perfect religion, the perfect political system, the perfect and most accomplished way of doing everything.
Montaigne most certainly wasn’t the first to make note of our tendency to automatically assume the superiority of local beliefs and practices; Herodotus, the Greek historian of the fifth century B.C., made very similar observations in his Histories, noting how all peoples are “accustomed to regard their own customs as by far the best.” And in his famous Letter 93, which presents an early argument against religious toleration, the medieval Catholic theologian Saint Augustine laments the way in which old customs produce a closed-minded resistance to alternative beliefs and practices that, he argues, is best broken by the threat of punishment. When the 19th-century sociologist William Graham Sumner later named this tendency “ethnocentrism,” the term, and the allegation, became a mantra of 20th-century cultural anthropology.

Ethnocentrism – our culture’s tendency to twist our judgment in favor of homegrown beliefs and practices and against foreign alternatives – is not, I take it, a phenomenon in need of further empirical confirmation. It is quite obvious that we are all ethnocentric to at least some extent. I am a Canadian, and grew up with free, government-provided health care — a system that seems both fair and feasible to most Canadians, including myself. As such, I have a hard time comprehending the ferocity with which so many have opposed health care reform in the United States. But equally, someone raised in a conservative swath of Texas is just as likely to find my sense of what is “fair” highly dubious.

Philosophers have long been aware of the role of culture and upbringing in facilitating moral disagreements of this sort. And more recently, moral psychologists have begun to offer insightful accounts of the psychological forces that make such disagreements so impervious to resolution through reasoned debate. For instance, in his recent book, “The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion,” Jonathan Haidt argues that, far from being a way of holding our moral beliefs up to critical scrutiny, moral reasoning is generally something we use merely to convince others of long-held beliefs that we are unwilling to abandon. If we reflect on what it’s actually like to argue with others who fundamentally disagree with us on moral or political matters, Haidt seems to get something right; often, no amount of persuasive reasoning, clear argument or exposed contradiction can shake us from what we already believe.

In light of the recent escalation of partisanship in the United States, not to mention other widening global ideological fissures, I think it’s important that we reflect, however briefly, on what we should make of this fact, with regard to our own ethnocentrism. Is ethnocentrism something we’re doomed to? Can we avoid it? If so, should we avoid it? Is it even a bad thing?

Philosophers have responded to the pervasive influence of culture on our moral beliefs in various ways. Many have embraced some form of skepticism. To take a contemporary example, John L. Mackie (1917-81) famously cited ethnocentrism as evidence that there are no objective moral facts, or at least none that we can access. If our moral beliefs are dictated by our culture or way of life, he argued, then it is senseless to think of ourselves as capable of discerning objective moral truths; what room is left for such facts to make an impact on our consciousness? Mackie thought of himself as an “error theorist” — because, in his view, anytime we make a moral judgment that purports to be objectively true we are inevitably wrong — but there are other skeptical ways of responding to the fact of ethnocentrism. Many have argued, for instance, that the influence of culture on our moral beliefs is evidence not of error theory but of moral relativism: the idea that the moral truth, for any given people, is determined by their culture — the set of shared practices and beliefs that they ascribe to. We know from various sources,
including Plato’s dialogues, that some Ancient Greeks defended such a view. And contemporary philosophers like David Wong and Gilbert Harman are among its serious proponents.

Tempting as these skeptical reactions to ethnocentrism may seem at first glance, there are important reasons to be hesitant. For one, however obvious it may be that culture plays an important role in our moral education, it is nevertheless very hard to prove that our moral beliefs are entirely determined by our culture, or to rule out the possibility that cultures themselves take some direction from objective moral facts. Since it is these hard-to-prove claims that Mackie and other error theorists need to make their argument work, we should hesitate before jumping on board. Second, moral relativism, for its part, seems like an odd and unwarranted response to ethnocentrism. For it’s not at all clear why the influence of culture on our moral beliefs should be taken as evidence that cultures influence the moral truth itself — so that, for instance, child sacrifice would be morally permissible in any community with enough members that believe it to be so. Not only does that conclusion seem unmotivated by the phenomenon under discussion, it would also paradoxically convert ethnocentrism into a kind of virtue (since assimilating the views of one’s culture would be a way of tapping into the moral truth), which is at odds with the generally pejorative understanding of the term.

Most important of all is the fact that there are other, more straightforward, and less overtly skeptical, ways of responding to ethnocentrism. Chief among these, in my view, is the simple but humbling acknowledgment that ethnocentrism is a danger that confronts us all, but not one that should disillusion us from the pursuit of truth altogether. This is the sort of response to ethnocentrism one finds, for instance, in the work of the 19th-century English philosopher John Stuart Mill. Mill is quick to acknowledge the “magical influence of custom” on our thought, and the way in which local beliefs and practices inevitably appear to us to be “self-evident and self-justifying,” but he does not see this as a reason to lapse into skepticism. Instead, and quite reasonably, he takes it to be evidence of both our intellectual laziness and our fallibility — the ever-present possibility that our beliefs might be wrong. The fact that our deepest-held beliefs would be different had we been born elsewhere on the planet (or even, sometimes, to different parents farther down the street), should disconcert us, make us more open to the likelihood of our own error, and spur us to rigorously evaluate our beliefs and practices against alternatives, but it need not disillusion.

In a more candid moment of “Des Cannibales,” of which there are many across Montaigne’s writings, the author unabashedly admits to having forgotten a third observation that the native Brazilians shared with him in response to his question. His forgetfulness is a pity not just because it deprives us of a window onto a 500-year-old cultural confrontation that is fascinating in its own right, but also because it deprives us of a potential opportunity to do just what Mill recommends: re-examine our beliefs and practices, become alert to weaknesses and inconsistencies in our own thinking, discover something plausible in a culturally unfamiliar point of view and, in so doing, become better than the ethnocentric creatures that we are.

Related in The Stone: “The Enlightenment’s ‘Race’ Problem, and Ours.”

Adam Etinson is a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His work has appeared in The Journal of Moral Philosophy, Human Rights Quarterly, Res Publica and Dissent.