THE WORLD IS BECOMING increasingly diverse culturally. More and more we come in contact with people who have different customs, religions and perspectives. Some of these cultural differences are ethically neutral. What people eat and wear, and how they celebrate their special occasions generally, though not always, stands outside the category of ethical evaluation. But this is not the case for all cultural practices. Often customs that are unquestioningly accepted in one part of the world are considered abhorrent in another. For example, female genital mutilation is practiced in numerous locations within Africa and Asia. Certain tribes in Papua New Guinea are widely believed to be cannibalistic. Both practices would not just be seen as different from what is acceptable in Western cultures; they would be considered highly un-ethical, even criminal. Moreover, it is not just that behavioral standards vary from place to place; they also change over time within the same society. Restricting women to certain specific roles in the workplace was a given in years past, but reinstating those limitations would be seen as highly unethical by many today. Many of the ancient Greeks saw slavery as a natural part of life, but the vast majority of modern Greeks would consider it repugnant. While we could add to the list of examples in both categories, the primary observation is this: from one culture to another and from one time to another within the same culture, there is diversity in what is considered right and wrong. Cultural Relativism what are we to make of such diversity in ethical issues? Cultural relativism claims to have the answer to this. Diversity means that there are no absolute standards for moral judgment. Any standard for determining right and wrong is relative. Ethical relativism, the belief that there is no moral truth that applies to all people at all times, 1 has been around for a long time. The early Greek philosopher Protagoras opened his book On Truth with the words “Man is the measure of all things.”2 The specific version of relativism that we will consider, cultural relativism, is a more recent development. Cultural relativism says that it is not each person but each person’s culture that is the standard by which actions are to be measured. “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” provides a simplified statement of cultural relativism. In this bumper sticker, two beliefs of cultural relativism are close to the surface. First, the reason we should “do as the Romans do” when in Rome has nothing to do with the superiority of Roman ethics. No ethical system is better than any other. For us to be able to say that the ethics of the Romans is any better than that of Athens or that the ethics of Islamic fundamentalism is any better than that of Confucianism requires a common standard outside of these cultures to which they can be compared. However, the existence of an absolute ethical measure is denied by cultural relativism. The only thing we can say about different practices is that they are different, not that they are better or worse. Better and worse are comparative terms that make sense only with a measure that is not tied to any culture. So why should we do as the Romans do while in Rome if there is nothing about the Roman way of doing things that is superior to other ethical frameworks? This leads to the second point. Most people recognize that anarchy is destructive. Every society has to have some structure and order or it cannot survive. Included in this social structure are ethical standards. Although ethical standards differ from one place to the next, to preserve social order people are obligated to follow the norms of the culture they live in. While we now have some of the basic tenets of cultural relativism in place, we need to break it down into its specifics, because as it stands it involves a leap of logic. The problem is this: just because cultures differing what they consider right and wrong, can we conclude that one ethical answer is as good as another? Obviously not. When two answers conflict, we do not automatically assume that both are equally true. It is logically possible that one or both of them are wrong. For example, if two people came up with different sums to 2 + 2, we would not accept both answers as right. Why then should we view both cannibalism in one culture and criminalization of cannibalism in another as accept-able? We need something more than the fact that we disagree about beliefs to show that absolutism—the belief that an objective right and wrong exists which applies to all people at all times—is false. Cognitive Relativism Because the more nuanced statements of cultural relativism recognize that diversity in ethical practices does not require the conclusion that ethical truth is relative, the concept of cognitive (or conceptual) relativism is needed to bridge the gap.3 Cognitive relativism extends relativity to any type of claim. It is not just ethical statements that are true only relative to culture. All “truths” are judged by cultural standards. Nothing, even the answer to 2 + 2, is simply true, at least as far as we can know. We have no neutral way of seeing the world, no Archimedean point from which to get an undistorted picture.4 Truth is always perspectival; things are true only relative to something else, and that “something else,” for cultural relativism, is one’s culture. What pulls cognitive relativism together with cultural relativism is the belief that culture is the filter through which we see and interpret the world, including its moral component. As Ruth Benedict puts it, “No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking. Even in his philosophical probing he cannot go behind these stereotypes; his very concepts of the true and the false will still have reference to his particular traditional customs.”5 What this means is that our social background does not just influence how we see reality. It also creates the only reality we can know. We never see things “as they are.” How we perceive what we perceive is determined by our perspective, which is culturally determined. When in Rome, Do as the Romans Do 31The idea that no single cognitive truth exists may sound very strange, but it is not difficult to see how one could draw this conclusion. If you have grown up in a Western culture, you probably believe that Western ways of seeing the world are correct. Therefore, when we try to predict future events, we rely on computer models, statistical studies, polling and appeals to laws of physics, motion or thermodynamics. However, individuals from other societies may stake their future on the exploration of chicken intestines by a shaman. It is important to realize that, as ridiculous as it seems to us that the inside of a chicken has any relevance for our major decisions, it seems just as strange in some cultures to rely on Western methods. How do we know our ways are better? The consistent relativist would argue that there is no possibility of an unbiased point of view. The definition of better and the reasons that seem more reasonable to us grow out of our cultural conditioning. Therefore, relativism says that both the person who consults a physician and the one who goes to see the local shaman are equally right to conclude that their medical treatment is the best, provided their solution conforms to cultural customs. If cognitive relativism is true, then cultural relativists feel that no outsider has a legitimate basis on which to criticize the customs and practices of another group. No absolute ethical judgment can be applied across cultural lines because there is no absolute knowledge about any aspect of the world. It is not just that we see only the world created by our cultural influences but that we also cannot evaluate other world-views except by appeal to our own. Our own discussions of these matters of “taste” implicitly invoke the standards set by our paradigms and our way of going on from them, and here we can speak of right and wrong. But if we are talking of the views of an-other society we shall speak of what is true by their standards and by our standards, without the slightest thought that our standards are “correct.”6Moral Judgment One question that is foundational to ethical theory is how we decide what is ethically correct. Most ethical systems look to an absolute yard-stick, though they differ among themselves about what this standard is or how it is discovered. As we have seen, relativism rejects the existence of a universal and absolute standard. In one sense this simplifies the ethical task. We are not burdened with defending one set of guidelines over against competing claims. Nor do we have to justify how we get our ethical principles. Instead, we look at what is common practice within a particular society. What they do is what all in that society should do. Accepted practices constitute the moral obligations of that society. Since no culture has a corner on truth, this is a natural transition. The only standards we will ever have grow out of our social environment. There-fore, the means by which we measure the behavior of insiders is deter-mined by what is considered acceptable by the group itself. While right and wrong are not to be understood in an absolute sense, this does not mean that we should never make a moral judgment. There are extreme relativists who say that the same thing may be right for one person and at the same time wrong for someone else, but this is not the position of cultural relativism. Melville Herskovits argues that “cultural relativism, in all cases, must be sharply distinguished from the concept of the relativity of individual behavior [extreme relativism], which would negate all social contracts over conduct. Conformity to the code of the group is a requirement for any regularity in life.”7 For stability and order in life, we need rules, but what we see as right and wrong is relative to a particular culture. Therefore, the cultural relativist is not involved in a contradiction if he says abortion is wrong in his culture but can be right in other cultures; as long as his society disapproves of abortion and the other cultures he refers to happen to approve abortion. Moral standards exist, but these standards are localized and vary from one society to the next and one time to the next. While relativism does not entail the belief that we should refrain from all ethical judgment, it does say that we should not impose our standards on outsiders. This creates a very practical difficulty, however. What should be our attitude toward practices that other societies accept but which we believe to be not just wrong but horrific? For example, most of us would be repulsed by cannibalism or infanticide. The relativist argues that this negative reaction does not originate from knowledge of an absolute moral measure. Our feelings toward certain acts are simply a reflection of our culture. Because of this, we cannot see the same act in the same way that people from the other culture see it. But were we a part of a culture that practices infanticide, for example, our feelings toward infanticide would be very different. As D. Z. Phillips puts it, if I hear that one of my neighbors has killed another neighbor’s child, given that he is sane, my condemnation is immediate. . . . But if I hear that some remote tribe practices child sacrifice, what then? I do not know what sacrifice means for the tribe in question. What would it mean to say I condemned it when the “it” refers to something I know nothing about? If I did condemn it, I would be condemning murder. But murder is not child sacrifice.8SummaryThe goal of cultural relativism is not merely to convince us to adopt a theoretical position. Instead, it sees its approach as a practical means of achieving a more peaceful and tolerant world. This seems to make a lot of sense since so much of the strife in this world has been caused by intolerance rooted in nationalism and ethnocentrism. Relativism argues that the first step toward eliminating intolerance is awareness of ethnocentricity. Ethnocentricity is unavoidable. This is the point of cognitive relativism; it is impossible for any individual to step out-side the circle of cultural tradition and thought forms. As Herskovits puts it, as long as our ethnocentricity involves only “a gentle insistence on the good qualities of one’s own group, without any drive to extend this attitude into the field of action,”9 it is benign. It recognizes differences but does not judge them by some measure outside the culture in question. However, ethnocentricity becomes arrogance when we make an evaluation of another culture’s behavior from our own perspective and act on that evaluation. Using the previous example given by Phillips, it would be presumptuous for me to label the child sacrifices of another culture wrong and to argue that this practice be stopped. If I insist that child sacrifice is morally wrong, I assume that my ethical system is better than one which allows the sacrifices. However, cultural relativism rejects the idea that systems can be compared to each other in terms of better or worse. Unless I have an absolute standard by which all actions can be judged and to which all people are obligated, infant sacrifice is not worse, it is merely different. Since relativism is convinced that no absolute truth about morality is available to us, it urges intercultural tolerance—a “live and let live” at-attitude. Our goal is not to convince others of the rightness of our views but to understand and be understood. Out of understanding and tolerance we find the hope of mutual respect between cultures.10The Positive Side of Cultural Relativism For its entire history as a nation, the United States has been a country mostly made up of people from somewhere else. While it used to be that the traditions and customs of immigrant groups blended together in the “melting pot” of America after a couple of generations, the more common metaphor today is that of the “salad bowl,” where people maintain cultural identity, native languages and traditions. Cultural differences are increasingly viewed as positive because we can be enriched by different perspectives and benefit from the flavors, colors, moods and ideas of various groups. In this way the insights of cultural relativism can be useful because they remind us that we should not simply assume that what is familiar is the right way or the only way. The cultural biases we all have often come to the surface when we are pushed to give a reason for a belief. Frequently, it comes down to “that’s the way I was raised” or “that is what I was taught.” The danger in this is easy to spot. Just because you were raised to believe something does not make that belief true (or false). Cultural relativism can open our eyes to this by questioning whether we accept a certain point of view simply because we are comfortable with it.Cultural relativism also stands as a warning that we should not too quickly assume that technological advance is necessarily a sign of superiority in other areas. At one time or another, most of us have probably heard someone defend the superiority of Western structures, ideas and norms on the basis of scientific and technological progress. However, even in societies often seen as “primitive,” observation tells us that there is social order and a means of governing. Marriages occur, children are born and raised, and people are fed, clothed and sheltered. The means by which different groups accomplish these common human tasks vary widely, but they work. These structures and institutions do not always function perfectly, but in view of the social, domestic and economic struggles in our culture, we might want to think twice before assuming that our way is superior to that of “primitive” people. The relativist’s recognition of the powerful influence exerted by culture is also instructive for the Christian. If Christianity is not intended to be limited to a particular culture, we must take care to distinguish between the gospel, that which is transcultural, and our particular expression of the gospel. The way we dress for worship, the style of music used and the architecture of church structures generally reflect our culture, but are not central to Christianity itself. This realization is in-creakingly being put into practice on the mission field. The Christian message can be integrated into another culture without changing many of the patterns of life that are comfortable and familiar. Therefore, on the one hand, we need to be careful not to load down Christianity with so much of our cultural baggage that someone from another culture is forced to accept our social values along with the gospel. On the other hand, it is important to remember that no matter how pervasive you believe Christian values are within your particular world, it is extremely dangerous to equate any culture with Christianity itself. Potential Problems in Cultural Relativism1. Who gets to be God? In chapter one I noted that all ethical systems are part of a more comprehensive worldview and that we should look for congruity between the two. It becomes apparent why this is important in evaluating cultural relativism. “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” involves certain assumptions about ultimate reality that are in direct conflict with a fundamental element of a Christian worldview. Cultural relativism is built on the belief that there are no absolutes, at least none that we can know. This means that truth is always relative to a nonabsolute standard: one’s own culture. Where does this leave God? In essence, relativism puts one’s culture in the role of God. While God is the standard of right and wrong in a Christian worldview, this function is filled by culture in relativism. Not all cultural relativists deny the existence of God, but to stay consistent with their system, they must deny that we can know what God’s moral will is for all people. This would be an absolute and universal standard. But such a view places God in the “so what” category. While God may exist, he is be-yond our knowledge and thus is irrelevant. However, this clearly contradicts what is assumed throughout Scripture. First, the Bible is clear that Christianity is not intended to be restricted to a particular cultural group or groups. Rather, the disciples are to go to “all nations” (Mt 28:19) and “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Since ethics is an aspect of Christianity, it seems clear that moral truth is to be considered transcultural. A second obvious shortcoming in relativism is that Scripture does not endorse the idea that what a culture does is right because it considers such a practice right. For example, Amos begins with a series of condemnations for the practices of nations that were neighbors of Judah and Israel (Amos 1:3–2:3).11 Even though these cultural groups are outside the covenant, God holds them to standards that transcend their culturally accepted actions. This does not make any sense unless God’s standards of right and wrong extend beyond the borders of his covenant people, so that Israel and Judah’s neighbors are judged by those standards and not by just their own cultural perspective of right and wrong. In any event, the fact that cultural relativism involves an understanding of ultimate reality that leaves no place for God to have any ethical relevance disqualifies the system itself as an option for Christians. Most will agree that Christian thought allows for some diversity in the understanding of God, but the conclusion that God does not exist or is irrelevant to ethical evaluations about human actions goes beyond such allowances.2. Do moral principles vary? Many critics of relativism go beyond the observation that some concepts are universal and argue that certain ethical principles are found in every culture as well. There seems to be good reason to do so. As noted earlier, the great diversity in ethical practices provides the crucial data for cultural relativism, which then goes on to explain these data as the reflections of different social truths. However, while one would have to live a very isolated life to doubt that there are differing moral practices, it is not as clear that societies dis-agree about moral principles. James Rachel’s provides the following illustration: Consider a culture in which people believe it is wrong to eat cows. This may even be a poor culture, in which there is not enough food; still, the cows are not to be touched. Such a society would appear to have values very different from our own. But does it? We have not yet asked why these people will not eat cows. Suppose it is because they believe that after death the souls of humans inhabit the bodies of animals, especially cows, so that a cow may be someone’s grandmother. Now do we want to say that their values are different from ours? No; the difference lies else-where. The difference is in our belief systems, not in our values. We agree that we shouldn’t eat Grandma; we simply disagree about whether the cow is (or could be) Grandma. It may be that there really is more commonality in ethical principles than would appear to be the case at first glance. It might even be possible to isolate a few core values that are truly universal, with the differences coming about because of differences in application because of differing circumstances.12Rachels’s point is that we should look beyond what cultures do to determine why they do it. The “why” question considers the principles behind the action. The “what” question is concerned with how the principle is applied. The application of these principles must be under-stood in the context of the unique social needs or different interpretation of facts within a culture. A certain tribe can believe the principle “You should not steal” is true and at the same time encourage stealing from neighboring tribes. This is possible because stealing from outsiders may be justified on the grounds that it is necessary for the tribe’s own survival (social need) or on the grounds that members of neigh-boring tribes are perceived as less than human (different interpretation of facts). When we get behind the observations of diversity, it can be quite credibly argued that all cultures embrace certain basic moral principles. It is important to remember that universal does not necessarily mean “true.” Even if it was universally believed that the earth is flat, this does not mean that this view is true. However, the cornerstone of cultural relativism is that ethical norms differ from one culture to the next. As I have shown, there is good reason to doubt that there is cultural dis-agreement on ethical principles. If this is true, relativism’s credibility is seriously undermined.3. Is relativism self-contradictory? One of the most frequent charges against relativism is that it is self-contradictory or, at minimum, incoherent. This problem arises because of two foundation stones of cultural relativism: “There is no absolute truth” and “intolerance is wrong.” When we try to put these principles into action, we end up with Orwellian-sounding concepts, such as “tolerant intolerance” and “absolute relativism. “To illustrate the situation, imagine a hypothetical absolutist society— that is, a society that believes its norms are true, and all norms that deviate from those norms are false. One of its rules is that all who re-fuse to fast on Tuesdays should be put to death. Not only does this group believe that this is absolute truth, but members act on this belief, putting to death at opportune times all that do not follow this rule. What is the relativist’s response to this absolutist view? On the one hand, our relativist cannot condemn this society because “there is no absolute truth” by which to judge these executions. On the other hand, this group has to be viewed as wrong by the relativist because, though it claims to possess absolute truth, in reality “there is no absolute truth.” Similarly, relativism asserts that “we must be tolerant of the standards of all cultures,” even of those cultures that have intolerant worldviews. At the same time, it states that “intolerance is wrong.” In short, the relativist’s position seems to be self-contradictory because it affirms two mutually exclusive things at the same time. Relativists end up in this predicament because their two claims—“there is no absolute truth” and “intolerance is wrong”—are not viewed as true relative only to cultural norms. In fact, they contradict many cultural views. Instead, they are statements which relativists propose as absolutes and which must be absolutely true for cultural relativism to be true. As such, cultural relativists break their own rules against the existence of absolute truths. Because cultural relativism assumes some universal standard of truth, whether it admits it or not, it becomes self-contradictory. We cannot say “right and wrong is relative to social norms” unless we assume that a common basis exists upon which the hearer could assent to the reasoning behind it.This same internal contradiction holds true for the whole of relativism. If all knowledge, moral and otherwise, is conditioned by environment, the absolutist society has just as much ground for claiming truth for an absolutist ethical system. To be consistent the relativist should say that relativism is true only for relativists. If there is no single “true for all,” then the relativist’s description of reality is not universally true. But this is not what relativism claims.4. Is moral improvement possible? “Change is inevitable” is a statement we hear frequently, and much of ethics deals with how we should view new developments in the world. However, the concept of change presents serious problems for relativism. It is helpful to remind our-selves that the belief that truth and rightness are relative to culture is the heart of cultural relativism. What a culture accepts as ethical at a given time is what its members ought to do. This principle raises two issues: what is the motivation for ethical change, and how are we to evaluate change when it occurs? Envision a culture in which slavery is practiced. A relativist cannot argue on moral grounds that this practice should be abolished. To do so would require an appeal to some standard other than the existing social mores, which allow slavery. Since customs are ethical truth for a society, slave-owning is a right for our hypothetical culture. Some cultural relativists have argued that reasons for change can be offered but they cannot be moral reasons. But the use of nonmoral reasons also encounters difficulties. Argumentation, at least in its generally understood sense, implies giving reasons for a belief. Positions backed by the better reasons should win out. The sticking point is that better is a comparative term that presupposes a standard. Since the only standard the relativist accepts is what a society believes at the time is “better,” these slave owners should not be persuaded to adopt a new position. The result is that no possible reason could ever be offered for the rightness of changing slavery in this society, or of changing any practice in any society. Reasons from inside the culture will not work because what is currently accepted practice is the obligation of all within the culture: It is right for that group. There is no reason that can be given to change a practice that is right. Similarly, reasons from outside the culture are unacceptable bases for change because any attempt to judge from the outside is, in the relativist’s view, arrogant. No one set of ethics is better than another. So why change the practice of slavery? Under cultural relativism, no good reason to do so can be given. Even though no ethical reasons for why change should occur can be offered under relativism, ideas about what is right and wrong in fact do change within social groups. However, this creates a special challenge for cultural relativism because it cannot say the moral change is for the better. Let us say that a group of slaveholders decides to abolish slavery on January 1, 2016. What is considered ethical on December 31, 2015 (owning slaves), will be different from what is seen as good the very next day (not owning slaves). However, relativists cannot call the abolition moral progress, because from their viewpoint no single practice is superior to any other. This again raises the question of why ethical standards change within every culture. For if we do not believe we are making a change for the better, why change? 5. Is tolerance always good? A common argument for cultural relativism is that it promotes tolerance. The idea that we should always be tolerant of other cultures sounds great at first, but closer examination may cause us to question whether tolerance is an unqualified virtue. Under the definition of tolerance and respect that cultural relativism establishes, we have no basis to call on countries to stop the torture of political prisoners or end state-sanctioned racism. Such an appeal would be intolerant and arrogant since our truth is no truer than that of the truth in cultures we would criticize. To put it otherwise, we cannot appeal to the idea of human rights. No such concept is possible in cultural relativism because it assumes absolute standards. All human rights are granted by culture, so if a culture decides not to recognize certain rights, no other social grouping should attempt to impose their standards. That is intolerant. This becomes even more difficult when we ask what to do when one culture must interact, voluntarily or otherwise, with another. Should we have been tolerant of Hitler’s encroachment on neighboring nations and his extermination of millions of people in concentration camps? Some relativists would say that tolerance should not be unilateral.13 However, a military response to the Nazis’ claim to the rightness of their actions would require that we place a higher value on our “truth” than theirs, and this is inconsistent with relativism’s central doctrine. When we look at the implications of seeing truth as relative, what we see can be disconcerting. At the core of our discomfort is the relativist belief that whoever controls a culture is the final judge of truth. This can be frightening, even in a democratic society where rules are decided by majority, because most believe that it is possible for the majority to be wrong. However, tolerance is more difficult to accept when we recognize that not all cultural standards are established by a majority but are often controlled by a tyrannical minority. Conclusion Cultural relativism is an approach that we should consider carefully be-cause it is just below the surface in many discussions of multicultural-ism. We want to be careful not to overgeneralize, because multicultural-ism can have different shades of meaning. Taken in its weaker sense, multiculturalism can be positive. It reminds us that no cultural group can claim final authority and that we have much to gain from learning about the customs and practices of other cultures. Many would agree that this is an idea that can be incorporated into a Christian worldview. However, in its stronger sense multiculturalism picks up the idea behind “when in Rome, do as the Romans do” and takes on a very different meaning. It states that the beliefs of all cultures are equivalent. One view is as good as another. In other words, it is just cultural relativism with a new label. When defined in this way, multiculturalism is no longer compatible with Christianity but becomes instead a competing worldview. The basic incompatibility is that cultural relativism substitute’s culture for God when defining the origin of right and wrong. Relativism does not launch a frontal assault on Christianity, but it under- mines it nonetheless. As John W. Cooper puts it, “Instead of attacking, it trivializes. Instead of rejecting Christianity as false, it grants relative truth. The faith is true for Christians but not necessarily for anyone else.”14 In the end it must be recognized that relativism dramatically changes the usual definition of truth. When relativism calls something true, it does not bear the dictionary meaning of “conformable to fact or reality.” Instead it means “what a given culture believes to be true. “Even apart from a Christian evaluation, cultural relativism has a number of flaws. Cultural relativism lacks internal consistency because it asserts that certain principles are absolute (for example, there is absolutely no absolute truth) even while it denies the existence of absolutes. Moreover, there is reason to believe that some cultures differ not so much in their foundational ethical principles as in how those principles are implemented. Finally, it seems counterintuitive to believe that no basis exists for judging certain practices better or worse than other practices and that people should tolerate any practice accepted in a given culture.