

Cultural Dynamics

<http://cdy.sagepub.com>

Comparative Anthropology and Moral Domains: An Essay on Selfless Morality and the Moral Self

S.N. Balagangadhara

Cultural Dynamics 1988; 1; 98

DOI: 10.1177/092137408800100106

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://cdy.sagepub.com>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Cultural Dynamics* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://cdy.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://cdy.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

COMPARATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY AND MORAL DOMAINS

An Essay on Selfless Morality and the Moral Self

S.N. BALAGANGADHARA

Rijksuniversiteit Gent

A Disquieting Suggestion

Arthur Danto, the well-known American philosopher, prefaced a book he wrote in the 70's on oriental thought and moral philosophy titled *Mysticism and Morality* with the following words:

The factual beliefs (that the civilizations of the East) take for granted are ...too alien to our (the West's) representations of the World to be grafted on to it, and *in consequence their moral systems are unavailable to us.*

The factual "beliefs" that Danto talks of are not about the structure of the DNA molecules or the space-time singularity in the region of Blackholes or even the laws of conservation of energy. Rather, they are beliefs about the social world which engage his attention. Suppose that Danto is right, and that the truth of his advice is independent of the culture of the audience to whom it is addressed. Suppose furthermore that thinkers from the East take this suggestion seriously as well. What would they say?

They would say that the factual beliefs that the West takes for granted are *too alien* for them to be grafted on to the beliefs that the East holds, and in consequence the moral systems elaborated by the Western thinkers are unavailable to them. This would mean that from the intuitionist to utilitarian ethics, from Kantian to contractarian ethics, from deontological to consequentialist ethics, would all be unavailable for the Eastern civilizations. But, that is not all. The very terms in which the Western thinkers conduct their ethical discourse cannot be adopted by the East: the notions of 'good' and 'bad'; the terms like 'moral' and 'immoral'; the concepts of 'moral rules'; the very idea, then, that "moral rules" are universalizable. Consider just one more extension of these implications: all moral systems which recognize that *human rights* are inalienable moral rights possessed by *all* human beings become unavailable to Eastern civilizations.

Even though these are not the only consequences which follow from Danto's suggestion, let me leave them aside for the time being to look at the issue from another point of view. Whether or not these consequences indeed follow from his suggestion depends, *inter alia*, upon whether there do obtain different factual beliefs that are relevant for the case. One such relevant factual belief is about the nature of human self. Do the civilizations of the East and the West have different notions of self? If yes, is it possible to assess the relevance of this difference with respect to the moral phenomenon? How does the notion of moral agency affect the construal of the moral domain? In this article, I would like to explore the answer to these questions. I want to look at the extent to which the moral systems of the West are unavailable to those of us who are from the East. I should like, in other words, to describe the western ethical systems against the background of some of the factual beliefs that we hold in the East.

The Structure of the Paper

This paper has four sections. In the first, I outline the conceptions of self in the East and the West and briefly contrast them. The next two sections deal with the notions of morality as I perceive them to be present in the West and the East. The final section contrasts these two views. The concluding part of this article reflects upon some of the methodological issues raised by such an exercise as this one.

It has not been easy to communicate intuitions of one culture within the language of another. The paper bears marks of this struggle in more ways than one. As a transitional piece within an uncompleted project that I am working on, it is caught in the half-way house of framing the concepts of one civilization within the confines of another. This could create confusions in the reader, but I have not been able to do it differently despite the best of my efforts.

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to a methodological point. Even though I am aware that many conceptions of the *self* and *morality* have been put across in the West by scholars working in several domains, because I believe that it is possible to pick out one dominant conception of self and morality, I will speak of *the Western model of self* and *ethics*. The same applies to the East as well. The purpose of this article is not to present the views held by some group of thinkers at some period of time from either of the two civilizations, but to explicate the conception of the self and the ethical as they are present in the *folk psychologies of these two cultures*.

Such must be the nature of these conceptions that it allows those who have them to make *intuitive sense* of the variety of social institutions and practices that exist in these two cultures. This stance, however, is nowhere defended *explicitly*.

1. *The Self in Ourselves*

1.1. The Self in the West

The basic conception of self in the Western culture can be very briefly outlined thus: in each human being, there obtains an inner core which is separable and different from everything else. In such a culture, when one speaks of “finding oneself” one means that one should look inside oneself, get in touch with an inner self that is there inside oneself, and peel everything away that surrounds this core. To such a self, even its own actions can appear strange. As Rousseau put it in his *Confessions*,

There are times when I am so little like myself that one would take me for another man of entirely opposite character.

It is possible to be “so little like oneself”, to be both one and the “same human being” and a “totally different human being”, if there is a self that can be like and not like one’s actions. Rousseau again:

There are moments of a kind of delirium when one must not judge men by their actions.

The actions that one is ashamed of are performed in moments of such delirium. It is by referring to the inner self that one judges men, not by looking at their actions. And it is thus that one says of oneself as well: “This is really me” or “This is really not me”.

These are not just Rousseau’s sentiments alone, but those of a culture. The Western culture allows each of us a self: a self waiting to be discovered within each one of us; something which can grow and actualize itself; that which either realizes its true potential or fails to do so, etc. Such a self plays many roles: it *guarantees* identity when philosophers ask questions about self-identity; it *acquires* an identity when psychologists attempt to describe the processes and mechanisms by means of which a human organism builds an identity; it is the *agent* of the moral thinkers when they talk of moral agency etc. Such a versatile self has various properties. One of them is its *reflexivity*: the self is aware of itself as a self, or it has self-consciousness. Consequently, human

beings who are endowed with such selves are all self-conscious beings. As we know, most philosophers are agreed upon that self-consciousness typifies the uniqueness of human beings, and that this distinguishes Man from the rest of Nature.

Involved in the talk of such a self is, first of all, a distinction between human beings as biological organisms and the *selves*, which they are *endowed with*. Secondly, consequently, human beings *do not build* a self, but create an identity for the self. This already existing self acquires the identity (in the sense of taking possession of it), which the human organism has built up *for it*. Thirdly, human beings are seen as self-conscious beings *only because* 'inside them' is a self which is self-conscious, and *for no other reason*.

When I formulate it explicitly in this fashion, you may not be willing to accept the suggestion that such a concept of self is *the* Western concept of self. Space forbids me from going any deeper into this issue here in order to provide plausibility to my claim, but I shall try to do so later by showing that the Western notions of the ethical are simply *incomprehensible* in the absence of precisely such a concept of self. Or, more carefully put perhaps, this is the only way that I can begin to make sense of the Western discussions on the ethical phenomenon. Let me now turn my attention to an equally brief sketch of the notion of self in the Eastern culture.

1.2. The 'Self' in the East

There is no better way to introduce the concept of 'self' as it is prevalent in the Indian culture, it appears to me, than contrast the two different ways in which the two cultures talk about *persons*. Consider the following questions and their answers:

What kind of a person is he?

- A. He is a friendly person.
- B. He comes home every week to enquire after my health.

What kind of a wife is she?

- A. She is a loving, caring wife.
- B. She does not eat until everyone in the family has eaten first.

What kind of a student is he?

- A. He is an industrious and intelligent student.
- B. He listens to everything I say with great attention.

I would like to put to you that the answers marked 'B' are very typical of India, often very irritating to westernized sensibilities because they do

not appear to be direct answers to the questions at all. The question was, not what someone does or does not do, but what kind of a person that someone is. The former may be relevant to answering the question, but that alone does not constitute an answer. This would be one response.

The second response would be to say that these do answer the question, and do so directly. By picking out some or other action, it tells us that the person in question is someone who has the disposition to perform these kinds of actions. One of the attributes of a 'loving, caring wife' could indeed be the act of eating only after everyone else in the family has had their meal.

There is a third possibility which I want to explore. And that would consist of suggesting that 'B' does answer the questions directly, and that it is *not doing so* by speaking about dispositions at all. Instead, the answer is asserting an *identity relation between actions and persons*. That is, a distinction is not made between an agent who performs the action and the actions that the agent performs. An agent is constituted by the actions which an organism performs, or an agent *is* the actions performed and nothing more. And this appears to me to be the concept of 'self' that is present in the Indian culture.

In order to better appreciate what is being said, let the dummy letters 'X' and 'Y' stand for two biological organisms. In this case, the 'self' of X is nothing other than the actions that it performs. Even here, the nature and the character of the actions that X performs depends very much upon *how* Y construes them. There is another way of putting this: Y constructs X's 'self' in the same way X constructs Y's 'self'. Y is very crucial for the construction of X's 'self', because in the absence of Y the actions that X performs are meaningless. That is, Y is required so that X's actions may be seen as some specific type of action or the other. If we were to restrict ourselves to X in order to talk about its 'self', so that we may contrast this notion with that of the West, we could say that its 'self' consists of a bundle of *meaningless actions*. Because of this, the 'self' of X *crucially depends* upon continuously being so recognized by Y.

There is nothing spooky or mysterious about this: you are a son, a father, a friend, etc., only to the extent you are so recognized. And you can only be thus recognized when you perform those actions which are *appropriate* to the "station" of a son, father, friend, etc. The presence of these gestalts in the culture of the community not only imposes restrictions upon the way Y can construct X's 'self', and thus reducing the possible arbitrariness involved in such a construal, but it also enables X to challenge Y within limits.

1.3. East and West: The Selves in Contrast

Let me now contrast these cultural conceptions of selves, thus elucidating them a bit more. At an experiential level, the Western man feels the presence of 'something' deep inside himself even if he is unable to say what it is. Better still, he intuits a 'presence'. By contrast, the Easterner would experience nothing, or some kind of hollowness. To use a metaphor, the latter would experience his 'self' as an onion stripping of whose layers would correspond to the bracketing of others' representations. At the end of such an operation, what is left over is exactly nothing, and that would be how someone from the East experiences his 'self'. This experiential difference is *not* being mentioned in support of my claim, but only to make it intelligible.

In one culture, human organisms are endowed with selves in whose nature it is to be different from one another. A human organism builds an identity (in the psychological sense) *for* such a self; the latter, in its turn, is what makes such an endowed organism unique. This means that the self can be individuated, and the criteria for it are precisely its possessions: at the minimum, for example, the body of a human organism belongs to the self whose body it is. In the other culture, the 'self' is a meaningless bundle of actions *created* by human organisms. The psychological identity of such a 'self' is a construction of the 'other'. A human organism which builds such a 'self' is conscious, to be sure, but it lacks that "self-consciousness" which is supposed to typify human beings. The dividing line between such a sentient or conscious 'self' and other sentient 'selves', where it is drawn at all, is of very little moral significance. That creatures other than human beings, under such a view, end up having 'selves' is not only not a problem, but also a recognized consequence.

The implications of entertaining such different conceptions of "self" are enormous. In the rest of this paper, I will explore some of them with respect to one domain, viz., that of morality. Hopefully, such an exploration would also make it obvious why I claim that the writings on the theme of "self" are no evidence, at least not by themselves alone, for claims about the notion of "self" as it may be present in a culture.

2. *An Ethical Problem and the Problem of the Ethical*

2.1. Learning to be Moral?

Let me enter into the theme of the present paper by trying to solicit your agreement for a shared epistemological intuition: today, we would

not be willing to concede that what we know about the physical world is all there is to the world. A physicist or a logician or a mathematician is someone who is always trying to learn physics or logic or mathematics. That is, we do not call someone a physicist *because* he has reached a stage where no further physical knowledge is to be had. We believe, rightly in my view, that considerable though our collective knowledge of the world is, we are never finished learning about the world. There are, of course, many reasons for this belief: at least one of them has to do with the complexity of the universe that we are a part of.

Consider now another broad agreement that obtains today, all controversies notwithstanding, regarding moral phenomena: morality pertains to the domain of regulating human intercourse. Each of us knows without requiring to be told that human interactions are extremely complex. One way or another, we are busy learning to go about in the world and with our fellow-human beings throughout our entire life. Consequently, we are never finished learning to be moral, or so would one think, if our epistemological intuition is applicable here, as it surely must be. And yet, I put to you, *such is not the case in the Western culture today.*

I am not suggesting that the western culture believes that one could behave morally without learning to do so. What I want to draw your attention is to *the kind of learning process* that it is supposed to be. A forceful, if crude, formulation would go like this: learning to be moral involves the process of making some or other moral principles one's own. In the process of maturing into adulthood, what one learns are these moral principles. Hopefully, in the process of learning these moral principles, one has also acquired the ability to be *guided* by them. (But this is *not* an essential constituent of learning to be moral: the 'weakness of the will', because of which you do not consistently apply moral principles all the time, is not considered immoral by every one.) To the extent we say that someone is *still* learning to be moral, we usually think of that 'someone' as a child who is not yet an adult. That is, the belief is that moral learning has a *terminus*, and an adult has this terminus behind him so that the rest of the moral life consists of successes and failures in applying these "principles".

If all there is to "being moral" is an application of a set of principles, and if there are many 'principles' at the market place and if, furthermore, the theories that embed or justify these principles are all fragmentary, as is the case today in the West, What does the moral life really consist of? The answer is as simple as it is unpalatable: one simply does what one feels like, with the happy realization that whatever one does is con-

donable/condemnable from one point of view or the other. I would like to put to you that I understate the case if I say that this is a partial picture of Western culture today. This is 'understating', because this situation has been blessed and sanctified with the label of *pluralism*. "Pluralism of values" merely hides an abysmal poverty in moral life or, even worse, a profound immorality: not many moral thinkers would consider *ethical egoism* as anything but immoral, and yet that would probably constitute the best description of moral life in the West. What is the notion of the "moral" in the West which has allowed this extraordinary situation to come about? What is the consensus of a culture about the nature of moral phenomenon that allows it to believe that *only* moral learning has a terminus? And Why, in a culture obsessed with moral discussions as no other culture has ever been, has no one even posed the question whether *learning* to be moral could be anything other than a full-fledged learning process ending only with the death of those who are the learning subjects?

2.2. Action and Moral Rule

In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume raises a question, which has always been one of the basic concerns of ethical investigations in the West: What theory of morals could serve any useful purpose, he asks, unless it can be *shown* that all the duties it recommends are also the true interest of each individual? There are several interesting things about this question which are of relevance to this paper. *Firstly*, there is a belief about the individual that he requires *reasons* to behave morally which is precisely what a theory of morals is supposed to provide. He requires reasons because, this is the *second* claim, moral rules *constrain* his actions. Since it is rational that each individual pursues his 'own' interests, any constraint placed on his behavior requires some kind of justification. Hence the *third* condition which every 'useful' moral theory must meet: the reasons such a theory provides should be shown to *further* the pursuit of the "true interest" of each individual. *Fourthly*, there is also a claim about the scope of morality: because it recommends duties to each individual, and what is recommended does not depend upon the unique identity of these individuals, the recommendations are valid for *all* human beings. That means to say, *all* the duties that a 'useful' moral theory recommends are in the "true interests" of each individual because of the fact that all individuals have the same set of "true interests". Or what it recommends to all is in the true interest of each.

These comments do not exhaust all that could be said of this question, but it is sufficient for my purposes to rest content with a slight reformulation of these observations. It is believed that it is rational for human beings to be self-interested. And because morality constrains the pursuit of a rational activity, the former requires to be rationally justified. Hence the question: is it rational to be moral rather than immoral? Or, put in a more general form, why ought I behave morally? Under this reformulation, this question is an old one: it was Glaucon's challenge to Socrates in Plato's *Republic*. Obviously it made sense then, as it does now, to ask for a justification for moral behavior. To the extent that moral rules (or moral laws) constitute the domain of morality, to seek justification for having to behave morally is, to that extent, to seek justification for moral rules. A search, in other words, for a foundation of ethics. (I would like to disregard the distinction between 'moral' and 'ethical', drawn by many thinkers, in the rest of what follows.)

I would now like to suggest, simplified though this account is, that this fundamental intuition about the moral domain has been *preserved* intact despite all transformations and changes that the Western culture has undergone over the centuries. I would like to suggest furthermore that this picture of the moral domain, as consisting of rules requiring and having a foundation, is a deeply *religious* conception; and that contemporary ethical discussions, *including* those of the consequentialists who do not appear to fall under this description at first blush, are merely *secularized* versions of a religious intuition and a theological belief. (For the purposes of this paper, I will restrict myself to Christianity leaving both Judaism and those elements that Christianity absorbed from Antiquity out of my consideration.) If I can show that there is an implicit consensus in the West about what the moral phenomenon is, and that it is a Christian intuition, then Danto will turn out to be right, but for reasons that he may not have expected.

Before I do this, however, I will have to state what I take to be the Christian notion of the moral domain. Given the length of the paper, I cannot but simplify it. I hope that it is recognizable nonetheless.

To begin with, what makes something into a Law is that it is willed by the Sovereign. A Sovereign is the supreme authority over a domain which belongs to him. What is willed by the sovereign is Law to those 'things' that belong to the dominion of the sovereign, and the 'reason' for obedience is that the Law has its origin in the sovereign. Christianity countenances only one Sovereign, the Lord and Master of All, and His Will is the Law of the universe. This Law is the Moral Law, present in

the cosmos and revealed to the authority. Obedience to it is “being moral”, because there are no other conceptions of (moral) Law and no other Sovereign. All human beings belong to the dominion of the Sovereign and, as His subjects, they have to obey His Will. There is a reason why I have capitalized *Law* throughout. It is to indicate that it belongs to the family of concepts, which is expressed by *Das Recht* and *Le Droit* in German and French respectively. This should suggest that what is willed by the sovereign is not only a law, but also Right. That means to say, what gives “moral” character to what is willed by the sovereign is that its origin is the sovereign. This notion contains the seed of the conflict we are very familiar with now-a-days: the ‘morality’ of legality. Because ‘Law’ cannot be distinguished from ‘morality’, the presence of more than one sovereign is sufficient to provide us with the problems we are familiar with. (To discuss this any further is, however, beyond this paper.)

Consequently, some of the criticisms made against “religious ethics” do not really hold much water. Plato’s question, Whether God Wills Good because something is Good or Whether something is Good because God Wills it, is often taken to exhibit the problem with religious ethics: if the latter, it is suggested, God becomes a terrible despot and if the former, we can do without Him in our search for the foundation of ethics. This criticism would make sense if the Good can be divorced from God’s Willing, and if there was some way of understanding Good (Right) independent of The Sovereign. That, however, is not the case. The notion of Right that we have, in all interesting Natural Rights theories for example, is quite incomprehensible without the presence of the notion of sovereignty.

Be as this may, none of this is immediately relevant to my concerns at the moment. What is relevant is the extent to which such a picture is required, if sense is to be made of the western notion of morality.

Before proceeding any further, let me briefly return to the question of moral learning. The notion of morality that I have sketched partially explains to us why one does not learn (in any way other than making some principles one’s own) to be moral: all that moral laws can do is to impose restrictions on the choices open to an individual. Because it functions as a decision ‘rule’ used to choose between different courses of action, the requirement is that there are alternatives to choose from. *How* to generate the courses of action themselves? is not a question that morality addresses itself to. Consequently, the ability to create alternatives, which is what learning entails, is not acquired when one acquires

moral principles. The importance of this point, I trust, will become clearer later on when we discuss the notion of 'morality' in the Indian culture. For the moment, what we need to see is the extent to which a religious picture undergirds this idea of morality.

2.3. The Moral Agency

There is a widely prevalent belief in the West that there is a distinction between the moral domain and the non-moral one and, consequently, between a moral action and a non-moral one. What is it, then, that makes an action into a moral action?

The first necessary condition to consider some action as a moral action is that it must be susceptible to a description under some or other moral rule. A moral rule is a normative statement expressing either a prohibition or an obligation. While this necessary condition might capture the intuition of the "deontological" conception of ethics, it might be said, it does not do so with respect to the "consequentialist" notion of ethics. Because such an objection, if raised, has some force I would like to reformulate the necessary condition thus: if an action or its consequences can be so described that either of the two fall under a normative description embodying an "ought", then such an action is a moral action either directly or derivatively. This necessary condition takes care of both utilitarianism and situationist ethics under some versions: the Benthamite principle of the greatest happiness of the greatest number and Fletcher's *Agapé* principle. Needless to say, this condition cannot do justice to extreme versions of Casuistry or act deontologism.

But even they get taken care of, when we identify the second necessary condition. Consider an act or its consequence that you would be willing to call immoral, whatever your own pet theory of moral phenomenon. In the process of attributing moral responsibility, which involves identifying the moral agent, let us suppose you are led to a computer or some sentient, but non-human being. As soon as this identification is made, you would not be willing to consider the action as something that pertains to the domain of morality anymore. The reason for it is obvious: neither of the two are considered as *moral agents*. This provides us with the second necessary condition: an action can be moral, either directly or derivatively, if and only if it emanates from a moral agent.

What is it that makes some organism, any organism, into a moral agent? At a first level, the answer is as obvious as it is inadequate: the ability to make choices. The inadequacy arises from the fact that other

organisms and systems, besides human beings, appear to make choices. Consequently, a second condition is often imposed: ability to make choices based on moral principles. That is, that human beings have second-order preferences is what enables them to choose between different principles. Choices made at this level determine the object level choices made.

When put this way, two points spring to our attention. Firstly, second order choices, as choices between types of choices, are not explained as causally determined ones. In some sense, such a choice is "free". Secondly, this *ability* to make second order choice is not what transforms some organism *post factum* into a moral agent. That is, some one does not *become* a moral agent **because** he has exercised a second-order preference. Rather, it is the case that some one *can* exercise second order preference, i.e., choose between moral principles **because** he is a moral agent. That means to say that the status of moral agency is a *precondition* for performing a moral action. Only organisms which are moral persons could possibly perform actions that are moral. Of course, within the Western traditions it is only 'human beings' who have the *status* of moral persons.

There is something extraordinary about this belief: in all other spheres of social existence, some human being becomes some one or the other, be it an industrialist or a father, only if the necessary actions are performed. But such is the definition of moral agency that your status as a moral agent is *logically prior* to performing any action what-so-ever. Because the very possibility of executing a moral action depends upon whether or not its *origin* is in a moral agent, being such an agent does not depend upon acting.

If we do not empirically *become* moral agents, by virtue of which property (or 'accident' of birth) are we moral persons? Even though there are several answers (including the one I mentioned earlier on about having second order preferences), they all follow the same structure: some property is shown to be the unique possession of all members of the human species. Human beings are 'self-conscious', or they have language, or they are rational etc., and this is what makes them into moral persons.

This can hardly do as an answer. In the *same* way human species differs from other species, every single species differs from every *other* species. An elephant differs from a gnat, the latter from a bird and the bird from a human being. Why does the typically human transform us into moral persons, whereas the 'property' typical of the gnats do not qualify them as moral persons? That we cannot possibly say what the 'morality' of a

gnat consists of is not an *argument* to believe that gnats are no moral agents. So, Why are we moral agents?

From amongst all the non-answers that I know of, there is one that answers the question by side-stepping this problem altogether. It makes discussion redundant by transforming the issue into a definitional one. That is, a moral person/agent is “defined” as some one possessing some species-typical property. While this move allows moral talk to appear ‘liberal’ in some of its versions (because it is possible to ask whether human creations, like corporations and ‘intelligent’ computers, are moral persons, but never whether animals are), it does not make it any more obvious or intelligible. Nevertheless, this strategem has the virtue of drawing our attention to this empirical fact: by making an appeal to linguistic conventions, support is sought in the linguistic practice that has established this convention. That is, one is indirectly referred to the way moral talk has been conducted so far. This appeal to *the history* of linguistic practice is an appeal to the history and tradition of the community that has spoken this way and not an other way. It is thus that we are led to the source that makes this moral talk intelligible. Consider the simplest version of this tradition: it is only because human beings have a soul, the ‘rest of Nature’ lacking one, that they are moral agents. When this talk gets fixed within the community, over a period of time it becomes *obvious* that only humans are moral persons. What changes, as times and tastes change, is the ‘nature’ of this property: it can now be “self”, “personhood”, “rationality” or whatever else that takes your fancy.

In other words, that human beings *are* moral agents and that they are so before executing any moral action is not ‘true’ by means of definition. Nevertheless, it appears thus to those whose ground intuitions are Christian ones. That the terms in which Christian religion and theology set the question have ended up as things that are ‘definitionally true’ or ‘intuitively obvious’ to the practitioners of secular ethics merely shows us the extent to which secular ethics in the West are merely dressed up versions of their theological original.

God and Morality

History of the West, however, is not just the history of Catholic Christianity; it is also one of counter-movements, including the atheistic and Protestant challenges. (As I said earlier, the Greek, Judaic and Islamic contributions and influences are totally ignored in this paper.) How is it

possible, for instance, to consider atheistic morality as dressed-up theology?

Forced to be teasingly brief, I can only gesture in the direction of an answer. Western atheism is a mere negation of Western theism in exactly the same way Casuistry was the negation of Legalism in ethics. It is the other doctrinal pole which emerges within the terms set by its counter-pole. (This would suggest that Western atheism would be impotent when transported to a climate where its counter-pole has held no sway.) Here is just one example of how the 'secular' (atheistic) morality retains the ground intuitions of Christianity. (Most of what is said in this entire section is also applicable with suitable modifications.)

One simply denies the existence of one Sovereign and speaks, instead, of indefinitely many sovereigns while speaking about morality: each individual sovereign's *will* is the moral law to that individual. Consequently, each one of us follows his 'own' morality; in this sphere, there is no one higher than the agent. At this level, each individual is a God: not only because each of us is a sovereign, but because our 'nature' becomes identical to God. God is a creator not because He created the world; God created the world **because** He is the creator. His action had its origin in Him; it was *ex nihilo*, as is ours. The totally 'secular' moral theory talks about a moral agent in such terms that it structurally parallels this notion of God. To understand this kind of discourse about moral agency *requires* the presence of thinking thus of God. Atheism is intelligible only in relation to a theism; equally, 'secular' ethics of this type are intelligible only when modeled upon their theological versions. Not all ethics would accept this form of extreme 'individualism' or the capriciousness generated by the presence of multiplicity of sovereigns. Preferring one Sovereign instead, they seek in their 'morality' the expression of the will of this sovereign. What does it matter what you call your God? Society, Genes, Rationality...etc., can do just as well. A rose by any name as they say.

The Moral Domain

Even though what I have said so far hardly finishes the story, I can now afford to be briefer. Let us now look at two other properties that are said to constitute the moral domain as well.

As we have seen, a moral law is binding upon all those who belong to the domain of that sovereign. If you have one sovereign, it is obvious that His will binds the entire world to Him. The cosmos is His domain—

therefore, His law is universally valid. From here, how short a step it is to say that moral laws have the following 'logical' properties: they are *obligatory*, they *forbid*, or that they are universally *compelling*. A Christian belief about the range and scope of the Sovereign's Will ends up as a 'logical' property of 'moral' statements: moral laws are *universalizable*. Those who deny the existence of 'universal' moral laws are not denying the intelligibility of this belief: where one allows indefinitely many sovereigns, there the will of these sovereigns cannot be extended to incorporate the behavior of *other sovereigns*. "Relativism" in ethics is another way of carrying on Christian ethics, not the denial of the nature of moral laws or the nature of moral domain.

Consider, next, the belief that moral domain is about moral *values*. Why is it *obvious* to almost every one in the West that morality involves ineluctable reference to values or norms? It could not be because it involves judgements: judgements involving 'values' are a special case within the class of judgements which make no reference to 'values'. Besides, to say that morality involves 'value' judgements is not an answer to the question raised. Again, the only intelligible answer that I know of is the one that refers to the linguistic practice of the community, and thus to its history. In a later part (see the concluding section), I will come back to this point in order to locate the theological source that makes this doctrine intelligible. For now, I shall simply repeat what I have said before: this linguistic practice is the history of a religious talk.

Do not get me wrong: I am neither prejudiced against nor positively inclined towards the Christian religion. The reason for harping on this matter so much is to suggest that the secularized versions of a theological original will appear sensible within the framework of a culture that is shaped through and through by that theology and faith. They are not a matter of linguistic stipulations that deal with the definitions of 'words'. Much less are they 'analytical' statements that are true by definition. They *appear* so because the linguistic 'intuitions' have a cultural history and that, for the West, has happened to be a Christian one. Outside the Christian world and religion, there obtain other worlds, other 'gods' and, who knows, even other religions. To people who inhabit such worlds and cultures, embracing other "factual beliefs", morality itself could appear differently. Danto's advice to the West suddenly seems less ludicrous when heeded to by the East. The western notions of "ethics" and "morality" could be profoundly alien to them *in the same way Christianity is*. Such meta-level statements as "moral rules are essentially obligatory" or that they are universalizable etc., may turn out to rest *not*

so much on what Ethics is about, but upon the tendency to “universalize” and make “obligatory” provincial conceptions by simply decreeing universality. And that is indeed so is a claim I want to make plausible by sketching elements from the experience of ‘moral’ domain from another culture.

3. *Appropriate Morals and the Morality of Appropriateness*

I have already drawn attention to the notion of ‘self’ in Indian culture. In this section, I shall explicate the notion of ‘morality’ as it is embedded in this tradition. A discussion and contrast between the civilizations of the East and the West is dealt with in the next part.

3.1. Appropriateness as a Moral Category

The most fundamental category of ‘moral judgement’ in the Indian traditions is that of *appropriateness*. That is, some action is ‘moral’ or ‘immoral’ accordingly as whether it is appropriate or inappropriate. (For the time being, I will use notions such as ‘moral’, ‘immoral’, ‘moral judgement’ etc., in a loose way without specific connotations.) What is it for some action to be appropriate then? There are several threads in an answer to this question.

Consider a biological organism ‘A’ interacting within the framework of a community ‘B’. This community is the repository of various institutions that divide up an organism’s life into easily recognizable ‘Gestalts’: that is, one is a son, a father, a friend, a householder, a pupil etc. To be a son, for example, is to give *form* to a myriad of actions that is performed and these ‘Gestalts’, as a first approximation, are preserved as a set of types of actions. No human organism can continue to live without *being* several of these ‘Gestalts’. It is important to emphasize that these Gestalts like ‘a son’, ‘a father’ etc., are not pictures or roles of an ‘ideal’ son or an ‘ideal’ father. Nor do they fully specify what it means to be a son or a father. They function, if you like, as a minimum common denominator suggesting the types of action by virtue of executing which some organism becomes a son or a father. Some organism ‘A’ becomes a son by being so recognized by the community ‘B’, and the latter does this in so far as ‘A’ performs some kinds of actions.

Two questions could arise at a meta-level regarding this situation: Why ‘ought’ A perform these actions? And What prevents the arbitrariness of the community B? The answer to the first question,

applicable at *all stages* of 'moral' life is this: there are *no reasons* why A ought to perform this or any other action. I will return to this point shortly. The most important element in the answer to the second question has to do with the way in which the community 'judges' the action of A.

In a previous paragraph, I said that 'Gestalts' are preserved as types of actions instead of saying that they are preserved as linguistic descriptions of types of actions. This was deliberate, because, as a second approximation, what is preserved in the community is neither types of actions nor their linguistic descriptions, but 'tokens' of these types or models of these descriptions. That means to say, they are preserved as *stories*. From this primary storehouse, descriptions of types of action can be generated; but the fundamental units that divide up an organism's life are stories. To be a son, thus, is to perform an action for which there is a model. The medium of education and socializing is, primarily and predominantly, that of stories. To belong to a community, to be its member, is to share this basic repertoire. Over a period of time, one also *learns* to generate linguistic descriptions of types of action which is a convenient shorthand to talk about actions. But, actions are not judged as tokens of a type, but as those for which models obtain.

It must now be obvious how the arbitrariness of the community is checked doubly: Firstly, there are no justifiable reasons why 'A' ought to perform any particular action; secondly, the resources that a community can use to recognize an action are those which are modeled in stories. Stories are indifferently many; so also are the states of affairs they depict. This enables any individual organism to challenge the judgement of the community, within the resources available to the community of which it is member, by being able to provide a model for its actions.

Descending from a meta-level, let us look at the stories themselves. As descriptions of states-of-affairs, they are about real or fictitious sons, fathers, householders, kings etc., performing a wide variety of actions. These stories set up situations and events where moral actions take place. By following the *history* of an action through, these stories allow one to see *how* the 'agent' gets constituted by the actions. (Remember, an agent is the action and nothing more.) By placing one and the same type of an action in several contexts, as performed by different people, it is shown that what in one context was an appropriate one is just the opposite in another. What one learns when one is *socialized* through stories are not just these stories alone, but the skill of being able to distinguish between them i.e., one learns to learn in a particular way. (How stories can do

this, what kind of a learning process it is, etc., are questions that I cannot, unfortunately, treat within the confines of this paper.)

The foregoing enables me to take the first tentative step towards answering the question raised at the beginning of this section, viz., What is it for some action to be appropriate? When stories are used to 'recognize' an action, what is being done is the following: a state-of-affairs described by a story is being *compared* to some current state-of-affairs. That which is being described in a story is necessarily more complete than any given state-of-affairs for the simple reason that these stories have an end by virtue of having followed the history of an action through. The story is no standard that embodies some value, whether absolute or relative, using which some action could be branded 'defective' in the moral sense. Rather, the story sketches out an alternative action to the one actually performed. It could do this either implicitly or explicitly; that depends on the kind of story chosen. The suggestion is implicit when the story traces out a similar action: in such a case, it is like a thought-experiment. The suggestion is explicit when it describes an alternate action performed by some figure who found himself in analogous circumstances.

Either way, the point is this: judging an action requires contrasting the state-of-affairs likely to be generated by the action with another state-of-affairs that could have been generated by performing some other action. That is, to say that some action is inappropriate (or 'immoral') requires that it be contrasted to some other action that could have been performed, but was not. This suggests that the judgement about inappropriateness is always *relative* to being able to propose an alternative action.

There are several important things worth noting about this kind of judgement. *Firstly*, quite obviously, the unit of appropriateness is the state-of-affairs. Even though it is convenient to speak about appropriate or inappropriate action, because it brings forth a state-of-affairs, it makes no sense to ask whether the action has the 'property' of being appropriate. Therefore, it is not possible to request information about 'the' appropriate action for all contexts (except in one specific way, more about which later). *Secondly*, appropriateness is a comparative relation. This implies that any moral criticism must necessarily propose a *concrete* alternative. Consequently, such statements as "you ought not to have stolen" etc., have no moral force. Moral criticisms presuppose competence on the part of a moral critic which is one of being able to suggest a concrete alternative. (Not an 'abstract' one like, say, "you ought to have starved instead of stealing".) *Thirdly*, this further implies that with

each moral criticism that you receive, you improve the ability to perform moral actions. This is an obvious implication because any learning process requires mechanisms to localize errors, as well as the possibility of learning to avoid future errors. A moral criticism that primarily involves a proposal for an alternative action is an example par excellence of how learning occurs. *Fourthly*, absence of suggestions to the contrary do not make the realized state-of-affairs the 'perfect' one either. The ability to make suggestions is limited by the state of knowledge, the absolute novelty of the situation, the resources of the community, etc. That means to say, what appears as the most appropriate action may later turn out to be a very inappropriate action. The other way holds as well.

My claim is that these are some of the things *one learns*, when one learns through stories. Each of them has profound consequences regarding the way in which moral domain is constructed and constituted in the Indian culture.

3.2. On the Nature of the Moral Domain

Moral Rules

If the justification for moral actions are the stories that model such an action, it is possible (over a period of time) to generate some statements that would bear some similarity to the kind of moral rules that the West is familiar with. But, here all comparisons cease. Because stories depict the fallibility of moral rules by setting up 'moral' choices as choices between moral "principles" themselves, i.e. where following some moral rule is possible only by violating some other moral rule, the very notion of moral rule must incorporate its essentially fallible character. That means to say, some rule is acceptable as a moral rule if it is *neither obligatory, nor forbidden* under all circumstances. These two properties (being obligatory and being forbidden) are considered as the crucial properties of all moral statements in the West. An ethics that makes no rule either obligatory or forbidden, it is said, allows for the statement that everything is permitted; that, it is claimed, is the nihilist position.

Could we say that the Indian notion of morality is a nihilist one? Of course, we could—nothing prevents us from doing so. Such a characterization would merely tell us what moral rules in India are *not* with respect to the western notion of morality; but it would tell us nothing about what moral rules are to the Indian traditions.

Therefore, let us look at the issue this way: an individual is faced with a variety of actions he could possibly perform. None of these are either moral or immoral as such, but are susceptible to being ordered accordingly as 'less moral', 'less immoral' or whatever. In such a conceptualization, moral and immoral cease to be classificatory concepts (as is the case in western moral theories). It is important to stress here that one does not claim that because everyone is imperfect, no moral action is possible or that the moral ideal, alas, is unreachable. Rather, it is a view that is recasting the very notion of what it is to be a moral ideal in the first place.

The Moral 'Ideal'

Here, I will simply make explicit what has already been said implicitly: some ideal is a moral ideal if it is realized and is realizable. Or, to be "moral" means being exemplary—in the sense of being *imitable*. An ideal son is one that any son can become; for this, neither moral virtue nor moral courage is required but, simply, *an ability to learn*. Moral figures, when pictured this way, are not exceptional figures whom but a few mortals can follow, but exemplary individuals whose path can be traversed by all. Given that we find ourselves in different sets of situations, there would be, in a manner of speaking, as many moral ideals as our stations in life differ. By the same token, what would be a moral ideal for a householder cannot be seen as one by a student. In this sense, to speak of *the* moral ideal, the way one does in the West, is literally senseless when viewed from within the context of Indian culture.

Moral Agency

If both the ethically good action, and the ethically bad one are absent from the Indian conception of morality, it would appear that there is no incentive to be a moral creature anymore. And, by the same token, the question Why ought I be moral? does not appear to elicit any answers. Would this not be a weakness in the conceptualization of the moral domain?

Because the moral domain encompasses all the actions of an organism, there is indeed no 'special' incentive required to perform moral actions: one is in an ethical domain all the time. The 'incentive' to execute actions that produce the most appropriate state-of-affairs is the belief that the agent is constituted by the actions of the organism. This incentive, as it is captured in the notion of 'rebirth', which is not quite as superstitious

as it is made to appear, *replaces* notions of moral responsibility, moral retribution and desert. It attempts to accommodate two fundamental ideas: that an agent is his actions, and that the latter have long range consequences stretching beyond the life-span of any single organism. It has as little to do with the idea of 'transmigration of souls' or with 'metempsychosis' as the Indian notion of morality has to do with Western nihilism. No 'reason' other than the belief about the nature of human 'self' is required as a motivation to perform moral actions. That means to say, the theory of 'karma' emerges as a component in the theory of personal identity. Where the self is constituted by the actions, there the Socratic question Why ought I be moral? is a senseless one. There is no answer to it because the question is unintelligible.

Furthermore, as must be obvious from the foregoing, the judgement about appropriateness is not a value judgement. Like all non-moral (in the Western sense of moral) comparative judgements, it is a claim about the world. Consequently, the kind of 'relativism' that is implied by this position has to do with the limited knowledge we have of the world. Because moral judgements are factual claims and empirical discoveries, it is possible that there exists a learning process which is comparable to any other learning process we know of. It is as difficult to speak of a *terminus* for moral learning as it would be to learning physics. If there is no 'perfect' moral knowledge to be had, it is not possible to execute either 'the good' or 'the bad' action either. Therefore, all that can be said of any state-of-affairs is that it is both good and bad. Not that it is good from one perspective and bad from another, but that if neither the appropriate nor the inappropriate state-of-affairs obtain, any state of affairs that is likely to emerge will be a combination of the two (to the extent it can be thus formulated). By saying this, one may appear to licence any action; to this constantly recurring problem I shall return from another perspective, when I contrast the East and the West. Needless to say, these beliefs do not stand isolated: the notion and perception of order that the universe is, the notion of knowledge, truth and practice etc., form a mutually supporting network.

3.3. 'Detached' Action as the Moral Action

Let me address myself now to three kinds of meta-level problems all of which can be partially satisfied with one and the same answer:

(a) First, a challenge.

If actions are indeed meaningless, what does it mean to choose between

two courses of action? Even if the desired state-of-affairs is the reason for the choice, to the extent it makes the action derivatively meaningful, the 'agent' allegedly constituted by the action is a creation of the organism itself and not the community. From here, it is but a short step to the West because one is endowing the organism with a set of preferences. Irrespective of how the organism acquires these preferences, it is after all the organism which exercises the choice—according to its values, norms or, if you prefer, some preference criteria. It is difficult to see why a suitably modified rational choice theory cannot accommodate this description.

(b) Second, a query.

Even if moral judgement is comparative, surely it must be possible to formulate a general advice for those who would like to perform the most appropriate actions at all times? Even if universally valid moral rules are not available, without a general set of heuristics it would be difficult to learn/know what kind of action should be performed. If there is no decision rule, is there a learning strategy? In other words, a trans-contextuality appears necessary amidst total contextualism.

(c) Third, a doubt.

To what extent is what is provided a description of Indian culture? Given the variety of religions and caste groups in India and the absence of references in the article, it becomes difficult to assess the scope of the claims.

I would like to begin with the doubt: if it is indeed possible to 'derive' from my claims (in some quasi-sense of the term) at least one doctrine central to all traditions in India, then my suggestions regarding Indian culture would gain credibility. Secondly, in so far as such a common/core doctrine obtains, it establishes the possibility of giving a 'general' advice. The nature of this advice would give us clues about its trans-contextuality or otherwise. To answer the first question, however, I need to go into the doctrine itself.

If, as I have said several times, actions are meaningless (outside of contextual interpretations) and moral actions, as actions, become appropriate within contexts, then the 'desire' to perform moral actions should be identical to the desire of wanting to perform appropriate actions in all contexts. That is to say, the demand would be to look for and propose some one kind of action that could be appropriate no matter in which context it would be performed. Because actions are always performed in contexts, the task is to seek the context of all contexts *and* for an action that is appropriate in that context.

There is one such context, which is the context of all contexts, viz., the universe. Actions performed in sub-contexts would inherit the 'property' of being appropriate, if they instanced that action which, when performed against the context of the universe, had the property of being appropriate. All organisms, however, are always within some context or the other and, consequently, all their actions always have some meaning or the other. Consequently, what kind of an action would be appropriate within the context of the universe and in what way could we speak of such an action generating an appropriate state-of-affairs?

Let us begin at the other end, the one we know better, to see whether this question can be answered. Suppose we look at human species as an individual with a history of actions. What significance does the universe lend to this individual's actions? If one does not believe that we were 'created' for fulfilling some divine purpose or the other, then there is but one answer that we can give to the question: viz., *none!* Actions have no purpose, no meaning, no goal. If, in other words, you were to systematically abstract from the meaning that the local contexts lend, and place human actions only within the 'master' context, your actions would be totally meaningless. At such a level, it makes no sense to ask whether some action is appropriate or not: all actions are equally appropriate, none is and neither of the two. Any action that can duplicate or reproduce this 'property' of total meaninglessness would turn out to be the most appropriate action in all contexts.

One of the characteristic properties of human actions, it has been maintained in the western traditions, is its goal-directedness. Aristotle suggests that moral actions aim at eudaimonia and, therefore, that the knowledge of this good is required to achieve it. Kant, for instance, made this property the cornerstone of his ethics: the sole motivation for performing a moral action should only be that of performing it because it is moral. Needless to say, all varieties of moral traditions necessarily assume this goal-directedness one way or another: a consequentialist focuses upon the consequences or desired state-of-affairs etc.

Given this background, What does it mean to perform meaningless actions? It is to perform an action without desiring, without wanting or even without aiming at any goal whatsoever. One *simply acts*. In other words, an action that does not carry the allegedly specifically human property of intentionality would be the same as performing a meaningless action. Or, as all the Indian traditions put it, performing an action without any kind of desire, without aiming at any kind of a goal, without attaching this intentionality to human action is the highest kind of action

that is appropriate all the time. Even though different traditions defend this doctrine in several ways, they all agree that such actions, if performed, would constitute *the* most appropriate action in all contexts. That is to say, a truly trans-contextual action can only be an action exhibiting the generic property of action: goal-less, a-intentional.

This does not mean that the organism, which is always in some context or the other, *chooses* between two alternatives: that of performing an intentional action and that of performing a meaningless action. It merely means that the organism acts; it acts because as an organism it acts whether it wants to or not. It neither desires to act this way, nor is it averse to acting the other way. To put it very crudely: if you are 'seen' as a son, perform the actions that are 'expected' of you. You do not execute them *because* you want to be a son, or because it is appropriate that a son does them, or because of anything else. You execute them *without any because*—you just act, period. Or, if an organism acts without any kind of preferences - such an organism would perform 'appropriate' actions all the time. There is no 'meta-preference' of being indifferent to outcomes or goals that characterizes such an action: all kinds of preferences are quite simply suspended.

But, it might be said, such a goal is a normative one: one ought to be a-intentional all the time, but it is not the case that the organisms *are* in fact thus. One ought to perform goal-less action, but human action is always goal-oriented. Consequently, in what way is this different from any other moral ideal that is current in the West? The answer is simple: one 'ought' to be a-intentional simply because human action is a meaningless action. Erroneously and acting under false beliefs, human beings think that action is always goal-oriented. They do not see that the context lends purpose, goal or meaning to human action. Contexts range from a local one of performing some specific action to the global one of being born into a network of social arrangements. It is these that make human actions *appear* meaningful, when in fact none are. Why 'ought' one just act? Because that is in fact what is. To realize this truth about human action is to be liberated from 'errors'. When viewed this way, it is obvious that choice theories of any sort would not do to express this notion of ethical and moral action. Total suspension of all choices is the first requirement to be a 'moral' (used in the sense of an "enlightened" or "liberated") person.

Whether such a view can be maintained or not, I believe to have made a case for defending the description that I have given so far as one that approximates the Indian notion of 'self' and 'morality'. It is not enough, to be sure, but it is a beginning nonetheless.

4. *Moralities: the East and the West in Contrast*

All organisms act; their actions are meaningless and the 'self' constituted by this set of meaningless actions is itself meaningless. The context lends meaning to actions and, thus, an identity to the 'self' so constituted. Therefore, some organism is a 'self' as long as there exists a context (a network of social arrangements) that continuously recognizes a self. An organism which sees this truth simply acts—as all organisms do.

Let us now go to a meta-level. If actions are indeed meaningless, why call/consider this attitude that encourages one to act utterly 'oblivious' to either the consequences or rules or to anything else a moral attitude at all? One could, with equal justification, call such an uncaring attitude *absolutely immoral* as well. For example, it allows you to carry out genocides—as long as you just do them and without caring. After all, it is totally meaningless as an action! Surely, it might be said, this consequence alone discredits any claims that such a theory could make to being a moral theory?

But of course, it is logically possible to call it a thoroughly immoral attitude. You could, equally well, call it an attitude that is beyond both good and evil. Danto, in the book from which I cited at the beginning of this article, says as much:

Not to care,...a problem with Gita as a moral tract, verges on not being quite human. *There is something chilling* in the image that the Gita creates as we approach the end:...they move through the battle field with that half smile of the inturned face of Indian art as they slay their way dispassionately across the field of conflict, *as though they were cutting their way with scythes* through a field of wheat. It is not a pretty picture. It is a picture, however, of a self that has located itself beyond good and evil. *That is a dangerous space*. It has been occupied by Nietzsche's superman and by those who thought themselves as supermen. It is not a moral stand, but a stand outside morality...(p.98-99; all emphases mine)

Some relatively minor points require to be made regarding Danto's description, before I can address myself to the question at hand. The above stance is not "outside morality", but outside the notion of the Western conception of what it is to be moral. It is a moral stand, but these cultures differ with respect to the notion of morality they use: it is not the case that Indian and Western culture have different moral rules such that what we (in India) call 'moral' is not considered so by the West. We are, in fact, talking about different phenomena when we talk about morality. (I shall explore some of the implications of this last statement

later.) That some notion of moral behavior can be called both totally immoral and non-moral should alert us not to the undesirability of such a notion of morality, but to the possibility that something is wrong with this kind of challenge. A moral practice, and notions about what it means to be moral, is interwoven into and supported by other practices of a community: the notions of 'selfhood', the processes of learning, the experience of 'body', 'space' and 'time' and all those others which support and sustain a notion of the moral domain. Therefore, the challenge is not whether some notion is logically 'air-tight', but to understand *how* this logical possibility fails even to be a logical alternative within the framework of a culture. How, while appearing to license every action, does a culture manage to sustain itself? Why no genocides in a culture that, 'logically speaking', should have no problems with it?

Let us array the historical facts to make this point. A culture obsessed with morality has been the author of deeds that 'ought' to chill any one's blood: Crusades, Jihads, inquisitions, witch huntings, colonizations, genocide of the American Indians, Nazism, transforming a continent and culture (viz. Africa) into slaves...the list is virtually endless. Cultures which absolutely forbid immoral actions appear to have brought forth such immorality that it takes an enormous amount of good will to entertain the possibility that these cultures are not intrinsically 'evil'. A culture that apparently occupies a 'dangerous space', occupied by Nietzsche (speak of anachronisms!), appears relatively virginal by contrast. ('Virginity', here, is relative: the claim is not that Indian culture does not know of tortures, wars or cruelties—assuming, for the moment, that they are 'chilling' deeds. The suggestion is that they pale into insignificance when compared either in magnitude or in scale to the acts that the West has inflicted.) What are we to make of this empirical history of the last two thousand years?

There is a reason to raise this question. The very fact that Danto advises the Western audience about the impossibility of adopting the Eastern morality, but does not even as much as implicitly suggest that it goes the other way as well, testifies to the strangeness of the situation we are in. Philosophers talk blithely about the universalizability of moral rules, the 'is-ought' problems, the nature of the 'good' and what-have-you without even pausing to reflect whether the very idea of the ethical domain itself varies across cultures. If what we, in India, call 'moral' is outside the 'moral space' for you, *how do we perceive/understand your notion of morality?* How must we (in Africa, Asia) perceive your understanding of morality, when you *do* everything you *preach ought not to be done?* What

are we to make of a 'debate' when sanctions against South Africa (to give just one example out of an infinite list) is defended by one group as a moral act, and by those in power as an immoral one? There is but one conclusion possible: 'moral' talk is pure rhetoric and a total licence to act immorally but feel sanctimonious at the same time. The white man, as the saying goes, speaks with a forked tongue. Succinctly put, it would probably appear to us that *Western morality (in all its versions) is totally immoral* and simply a stick to beat others with. The perusal of ethical literature that the West has produced simply reinforces this impression. The standard ethical examples are so grotesque (like the botanist Jim facing the 'dilemma' of himself having to kill one Indian or letting the Captain kill 10 Indians in a Latin American town) that it is scarcely credible to see them considered as paradigmatic examples of 'ethical' dilemmas built to test the strengths of moral theories and ethical intuitions. But that they are seen this way raises two questions: either ethical thinkers do not encounter moral problems in their daily lives—Why else the paucity of examples and the starved diet?—or their 'theories' never help them solve their moral problems. In both cases, they point to the irrelevance of 'morality' to daily life in the West. This is a problem not just of theories, but of a notion of morality. If such is the notion of morality that all you could have is either an 'ethically good' or an 'ethically bad' or an 'ethically neutral' action, the demand is always to provide one of these. If it is the case that such neatly packaged actions do not come, What are the consequences? There is only one answer: You *do* exactly what you feel like with the realization that you could always 'defend' the action as an ethically good one; or you do exactly what you feel like *because* you do not believe that such neat packaging is possible; or you do exactly what you feel like while suggesting that every one *ought* to do the same; or you do exactly what you feel like... An intuition that absolutely forbids immoral action gives one no practical choice but to be totally immoral!

The knife appears to cut both ways: against the background of the western conception of 'ethics', Indian traditions 'chill the blood'. Against the background of Indian traditions, the West appears totally immoral: Why does it appear so? What causes this perception?

5. *In Lieu of a Conclusion*

When we describe the moral domain of other cultures, the fundamental categories that organize this description are those from our cultures. Even though attempts are often made to depict the moral domain of other

cultures as 'accurately' as possible, the terms that structure such a portrayal are drawn *not just* from one's own moral domain. Implicit conceptions from and about various walks of life function as the backdrop *within* which the other's moral domain gets accommodated. It is almost as if one fits a partial description of the moral domain of another culture within one's own world view. This procedure distorts such a description beyond all recognition: no amount of 'good will' prevents the other from appearing grotesque.

Consequently what should appear as an intelligible way of life, given different supporting sets of social practices and institutions present in another culture, is presented not only confusingly, but also as a reprehensible form of life. More than little care, therefore, is required in describing the 'moral' domain of another culture. What, in any case, will not do are facile assumptions and cavalier attitudes like the one Danto expresses when describing the possibility of existence of different moral ideals in India:

An Indian will always excuse the actions of a man belonging to a different caste if it is provided in the moral beliefs that belong to define the man's caste, even though they are proscribed by his own caste...Imagine, for example, that there is a caste of thieves. There is honour amongst them, to be sure. But are we required to tolerate them on the mere grounds that they are thieves? There is no basis for moral discussion whatever if there is no sense of everyone belonging to the same general community within which differences may be tolerated. (p. 44-45)

Obvious as it may be to Danto, it is not so to me: What makes it so counterintuitive to this tradition, which Danto is a part of, to tolerate the 'thieves' and 'their morality' *on the grounds* that they are thieves? Secondly, what makes it equally obvious to him that in India there is no sense that "everyone" (the universal quantifier) "belongs to the same general community"? When Indians say "everyone", they literally mean everyone; the quantifier includes in its scope such entities as birds, bees, insects etc. On the other hand, when the West speaks of "everyone", the term includes *only* those who are capable of behaving morally and that, they believe, is what only human beings (not even *all* the members of the species) can do. Because we have already seen the extent to which this is a typically Christian belief, there is no necessity to rehearse the issue here. But this is the place, however, to redeem the promissory note about the relation between moral domain and norms.

One of the vexing problems within the Christian tradition has been about human salvation: are only a few destined for it? Many? Or all?

Religious figures were divided on this issue—raising as it did questions about the nature of divine will. Splinter movements within Christianity have split according to the answers given to this problem. Whatever the answers, it is important to note that this question did make sense, and continues to do so. The minimal agreement among various positions appears to me, as a layman, to be this: some ‘exceptional’ act (or, at the least, some kind of an out-of-the-ordinary effort) is required to ‘merit’ salvation. For nearly 2000 years, the Christian faith has believed in this sentiment. My point, with respect to secular theories, is this: the notion of moral individuals is isomorphous with this belief. One requires courage, virtue or integrity (or whatever else) to be a moral individual. Moral figures are, somehow, exceptional; they are what ordinary mortals can never be. As such, they embody an ‘ought’. A culture that believed and debated about the nature of God’s will, which willed the salvation of the few, for thousands of years can hardly jettison this belief when it takes to secular morality: it takes the form of ‘exceptional’ individuals embodying an ‘ought’; they are seen as being outside the ‘is’. To be moral requires some ‘exceptional ability’ or the other. It is this belief that makes Danto say the extraordinary things that he does say.

The problem is not merely one of presenting or studying another way of going about the world as a form of life to those who live it. There is a deeper issue involved, one which I can only touch upon.

Consider this compelling intuition that we all have when we study, say, another culture’s conception of morality (or self, or whatever): while ready to acknowledge differences, we believe that it is merely a different conception of the *same domain*. Our terminologies vary, our partial descriptions are different, but the *reference* of these is assumed to be the same. However, when the intuition gets worked out in some detail, it is not at all obvious that we (in these two cultures) are talking about the same domain. By taking this article as a case in point, if we were to put the *descriptions* of moral domain next to each other, it is impossible to avoid the equally compelling conclusion that they could not possibly be of the same domain. (Unless, of course, one of the descriptions proves to be ‘false’. But, then, it is hardly clear how, and in what sense, culture-specific conceptions of ‘ethics’ could be false.) Are the different words, different partial descriptions indicative that the subject matter itself is different?

Both of these views, each pulling in opposed direction, appear to be true: the belief that there are different conceptions of “self” and “morality” etc.; the belief that these could not possibly be *different* descriptions of the same ‘domain’ but of different domains.

An analogy might well help us here. Human beings could be studied differently by molecular biology, genetics and microphysics. Psychology, sociology and economics claim to describe the same object as well. If we take this analogy, the eastern and western conceptions of “self” and “morality”, say, would be as different from each other as a sociological and psychological description of some human phenomenon would be. That is, these culture-specific conceptions are appropriate at different levels. Should we look at it this way, neither moral nor cultural relativism would be implied, much less the ‘incommensurability’ of cultures. We would then be advised to use different words when describing the moral domain of different cultures.

This would satisfy one intuition, but not the other. There are two reasons why it is so: firstly, what would the upshot of following such an advice be? Are we to say that Indian culture is not moral, because morality, for example, requires ineluctable reference to values? This language—one that calls other cultures either immoral or amoral—is all too familiar to us; there is no reason to rehearse the problems involved in such a talk, especially given the kind of dominance that the West intellectually enjoys. Secondly, the intuition *is* that different conceptions of morality are not different from each other the way Psychology is from Sociology, but that they are *about* the same domain and at the same level of description. Why, otherwise, would most writings in Anthropology and Comparative Sociology continue to speak of different cultures having, say, different categories of ‘person’, ‘group’ etc.? Words like ‘person’, ‘group’ do not function as place-holders or variables, but as concepts with specific references. How are we going to make out whether or not we are talking about the same domain, the same object and at the same level of description? Does not this problem, applicable to a whole range of other concepts, make the entire project even more complex? What are the questions? How shall we proceed to solve them?

These, I believe, are the genuine issues that underlie much of the pseudo-debate around the problem of cultural relativism. We have, to this day, not laid ‘relativism’ to rest, because we cannot formulate the issue (as yet) that gave birth to relativism. This lack of success, as I see it, arises due to absence of the foundation required to formulate the problems. And that foundation will not be laid unless as descriptions provided by other cultures of both the West and themselves *against the background of their cultures*. It is only when that task is accomplished that we will know what the problems are.

I believe that it is time that other cultures do to the West what the West has done to them, viz., study the latter anthropologically. My paper

expresses this belief. Like all first steps, it is hesitant, unsure and imbalanced. Experience, no doubt, will bring the requisite skills. At the end of the day, when others learn not only to walk but to run as well as their western counterparts, it is anybody's guess what social sciences will look like. It is my hope to have shown that the prospects are daunting, but the possible results (should the attempt prove successful) appear to make it all, oh so, worthwhile.