All of us are, more or less, in trouble today about trying to understand cultures strange to us.

We constantly meet people from other cultures and races. We hear constantly of customs unknown to us. I want to discuss now one very short way of dealing with this difficulty. It is a way which many people now theoretically favour. But it is distinctly dramatic. It consists in simply denying that we can ever understand any culture except our own well enough to make judgments about it.

People who say this suggest that the world is sharply divided into separate societies, sealed units, each within its own system of thought. They feel that the respect and tolerance due from one system to another requires us never to take up a critical position to any other culture, that we can never claim to say what is good or bad there. I shall call this position “moral isolationism.” I want to suggest that it is certainly not forced on us. In fact, I want to go further, and say that it makes no sense at all. It is something you can say, but not believe. People usually take it up because they think it is a respectful attitude to other cultures. But, in fact, it’s not respectful. Nobody can respect what they genuinely do not understand. If we are to take anyone seriously, we have to know enough about him to make a favourable judgement, however general and tentative. And we do understand people in other cultures in this way. If we didn’t, a mass of our most necessary thinking would be paralysed.

I am going to take a remote example, because we shall probably find it easier to think about without getting agitated than we should if I took an urgent contemporary one, such as female circumcision in Africa or the Chinese Cultural Revolution, or the placing of political prisoners in Russian mental hospitals. And I think the principles involved will still be the same. My remote example is this. There is, I am told, a verb in classical Japanese which means “to try out one’s new sword on a chance wayfarer.” A samurai sword had to be tried out because, if it was to work properly, it had to slice through someone at a single blow, from the shoulder to the
opposite flank. If it couldn’t do this, the warrior bungled his stroke. This injured his honour, offended his ancestors, and might let down his emperor. So tests were needed, and wayfarers had to be expended. Any wayfarer would do – provided, of course, that he wasn’t another samurai. Scientists will recognize a familiar problem here about the right of experimental subjects.

Now, when we hear of a custom like this, we may well reflect that we do not understand it. This allows us to say that we are not qualified to criticize or judge it, because we are not members of any other culture either, except our own. So we seem to be moral isolationists. But this can’t be so. To explain why it is impossible, I will consider three questions.

My first question is this – does the isolating barrier work both ways? Are people in other cultures equally unable to criticize us? The question struck me sharply when I recently read a remark in the Guardian newspaper by an anthropologist about a South American Indian. This Indian had been taken into a Brazilian town for an operation, which had saved his life. When he came back to his village, this man made several highly critical remarks about the white Brazilians’ way of life. They may very well have been justified. But the interesting point was that the anthropologist described these remarks as a “damning indictment of Western civilisation.” Now, the Indian had been in that town about a fortnight. Was he in a position to deliver a damning indictment? If he was, then it seems as if we ourselves would be qualified to deliver an indictment on the Samurai – if only we could spend a fortnight in ancient Japan. That can hardly be right. But if we discounted all such criticism of cultures by outsiders, we would lose the benefit of a lot of splendid suggestions which orient us, and help us understand our own culture. What do we do about this? My own impression is that we believe that outsiders can, in principle, deliver perfectly good indictments – only it usually takes more than a fortnight to make them damning.

Perhaps, then, we must accept two-way traffic. My second question is quite close to the first. Does the isolating barrier between cultures block praise as well as blame? If I want to say that the samurai culture has many virtues, or to praise South American Indians, am I prevented
from doing that by my outside status, by not knowing what I am talking about? Now, we
certainly do need to praise other societies in this way. But it is hardly possible, surely, that we
can praise them effectively if we couldn’t, in principle, criticise them. Our praise wouldn’t be
worth much if it rested on no definite grounds, if it didn’t flow from understanding. Certainly,
we may need to praise things which we don’t **fully** understand. We say, “there’s something
very good here, but I can’t quite make out what it is yet.” **This** happens when we want to learn
from strangers. And we can learn from strangers. But we do have to distinguish between those
strangers who are worth learning from and those who are not. If we couldn’t make that
distinction at all, we would be isolated with a vengeance.

Can we then **judge** strangers? This brings me to my third question: what is involved in
judging? Now, obviously, there is no question here of sitting in a red robe on a bench and
sentencing people. Judging simply means forming an opinion, and expressing it if it is called
for. Is there anything wrong with this? Naturally we have to avoid forming (and expressing)
crude opinions – like that of a simple-minded, old fashioned missionary who might dismiss the
whole samurai culture as simply bad, because it wasn’t Christian. But that is a different
objection. The trouble with crude opinions is that they are crude, whoever forms them. It isn’t
that they are formed by the wrong people. Anthropologists, after all, are outsiders quite as
much as missionaries. Moral isolationism forbids us to form any opinions on this subject. And
it does this on the ground that we don’t understand what we criticising. But there are plenty of
things that we don’t understand in our own culture as well. And this brings me to my last
question: if we can’t judge other cultures, can we really judge our own? There is a great deal
that we don’t understand about it. And if we really can’t understand other cultures, then we
shall have no range of comparison for our own, no spectrum of possible alternatives to set it
against. We shall have to stop using the mirror which anthropology so helpfully holds up to us.
The power of moral judgement is, in fact, not a luxury, not a perverse indulgence of the
self-righteous.

It is a necessity. When we judge something to be bad or good, better or worse than
something else, we are taking it as an example to aim at or to avoid. If we really couldn’t form opinions of this sort, we’d have no framework of comparison for our own policy. We couldn’t profit by other’s insights or mistakes. Without that background of comparison, we couldn’t even form judgements about our own actions.

Our involvement in moral isolationism doesn’t actually flow from apathy, from the wish to shut down the whole business of moral thinking, but from a rather acute concern about human wickedness. We are rightly angry with those who despise and oppress other cultures. But this is itself a moral judgement. We’re condemning oppression and so forth. We can’t condemn if we think that all our condemnations are just a trivial local quirk of our own culture, still less if we try to stop judging altogether.

Suppose, for instance, that I criticise the bisecting samurai, that I say his behaviour is brutal. What will usually happen is that someone will protest, saying that I have no right to make criticisms like this of another culture. But his next move isn’t usually to drop the subject. He will try to fill in the background, to make me understand the custom by explaining the exalted ideals of discipline and devotion which produced it. He will probably talk of the lower value which the ancient Japanese placed on individual life generally. He may well suggest that this is far healthier than our own obsession with security. He may add, too, that the wayfarers didn’t seriously mind being bisected, that, in principle, they consented to the whole argument.

Now, if my objector talks like this, he is implying that it is possible to understand alien customs – because that is just what he is trying to do. He implies, too, that if I do manage to understand them, I shall do something better than giving up judging entirely. He expects me to change my present judgement to a truer one – namely, one that is favourable. And the standards I must use to do this can’t just be samurai standards. They have to be ones current in my own culture.

Isolating barriers just can’t arise here. If we accept something as a serious moral truth about one culture, we can’t refuse to apply it – in however different an outward form – to other cultures as well. If we won’t do this, we just aren’t taking the other culture seriously. This
becomes very plain when we look at the last argument the objector might use – that of justification by consent of the victim. My protester says that sudden bisection is quite all right, provided that it takes place between consenting adults. What I want to point out is simply that it can only work if we believe that consent makes a transaction respectable – and this is a thoroughly modern and Western idea. It would probably never occur to a samurai; if it did, it would surprise him very much. It is our standard.

And in applying it, we’re likely to make another typically Western demand; namely we shall ask for good factual evidence that the wayfarers actually do have this rather surprising taste, that they really are willing to be bisected. When we apply Western standards in this way, we are not being confused or irrelevant. We are asking the questions which arise from where we stand, questions which we can see the sense of. We certainly can extend our questioning by imaginative effort. We can come to understand other societies better, and by doing that we may make their questions our own – or we may say that they are really different forms of the questions we were asking already. This isn’t impossible; it is just very hard work.

If there were such a barrier, of course, our own society could hardly have been formed. It certainly isn’t a sealed box, but a fertile jungle of different influences – Greek, Jewish, Roman, Norse, Celtic and all the rest of it – into which further influences are still pouring – American, Indian, Japanese, Jamaican, you name it. If we think about this history for a moment, we can see that the moral isolationists’ picture of separate, unmixable cultures is quite unreal. The world has never been like that; it couldn’t be like it. Except for the very smallest and most remote, all cultures are formed out of many streams. All have the problem of digesting and assimilating things which, at the start, they don’t understand. All have the choice of learning something from this challenge, or alternatively, of refusing to learn, and fighting it mindlessly instead.

The universal predicament has been obscured by the fact that anthropologists used to concentrate so much on those very small and remote cultures which didn’t seem to have had this problem. And, no doubt, the early anthropologists were quite right to emphasise their
extreme strangeness, their independence of our cultural tradition. This emphasis, I think was the root of moral isolationism. But as the anthropological studies themselves showed, even there, the anthropologists were able to make judgements about the tribesman. And the tribesmen, too, were quite equal to making judgements about the anthropologists – and about the airplanes and Coca-Cola salesmen who followed them. Each set of judgements, no doubt were a bit hasty; both needed to be refined in the light of further experience. A similar transaction between us and the samurai might take even longer. But that is absolutely no reason for deeming it impossible. Morally, as well as physically, there is only one world, and we all have to live in it.

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