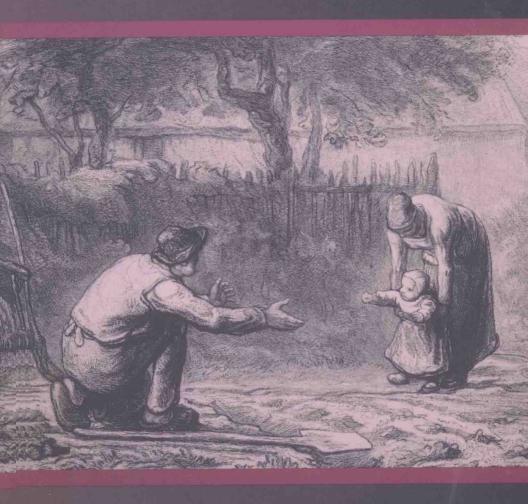
# FIELDWORK IN FAMILIAR PLACES

MORALITY, CULTURE, & PHILOSOPHY



MICHELE M. MOODY-ADAMS

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CULTURE,
AND PHILOSOPHY

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For Harold and Shirley Moody and James Eli Adams

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We all help to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the race's moral life. In other words, there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and said his say . . . [H]owever, the hypotheses which we make now while waiting, and the acts to which they prompt us, are among the indispensable conditions which determine what that "say" shall be.

William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life"

This book seeks to provide a plausible conception of moral objectivity and to defend a cautious optimism that moral philosophy can be an aid in serious, everyday moral inquiry.1 It thus sets itself against two important and mutually reinforcing developments in twentieth-century thought that have seemed to render such efforts quixotic. The first is a pervasive deference to natural science as the arbiter of all rationality. This stance leads many to denigrate moral inquiry because its concerns cannot fit into the "naturalistic" worldview defined by science. As articulated by philosophers such as A. J. Ayer, C. L. Stevenson, and more recently W. V. O. Quine, the authority of science allegedly calls into question the objectivity of morality and the possibility of rational moral inquiry, especially of meaningful philosophical inquiry that might do more than analyze moral language (Ayer 1946; 1984; Stevenson 1944; Quine 1981). This linking of skepticism about moral objectivity and skepticism about substantive moral philosophy is most pointed in the logical positivist beginnings of twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy, and in the work of positivism's contemporary heirs. But even those who reject positivist skepticism about the rationality of moral inquiry may be concerned by the apparent failure of philosophical moral theories to function like theories in natural science. On this approach, it is possible to know what morality requires without the benefit of philosophical moral inquiry; indeed, such inquiry is often deemed superfluous to, or dangerously disengaged from, the real demands of the moral life.

These skepticisms have been reinforced by the rise of moral relativism, a skepticism about moral objectivity based on claims about the diversity of moral practices. In its most persuasive forms, relativist challenges to moral objectivity are grounded in allegedly "neutral" observations of cultural diversity in moral practices—observations most fully discussed by social and cultural anthropologists. Relativism did not begin with Evans-Pritchard's Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande, or with Ruth Benedict's Patterns of Culture; it is at least as old as Herodotus and some of the Sophists. Yet moral relativism has taken on renewed vigor from developments in twentieth-century social science. It is widely accepted, in both academic and broader public discourse, that the ethnographic findings of cultural and social anthropology conclusively "show" that morality is not objective, and that there is no hope of finding a standpoint from which to assess objectively the validity of culturally diverse or conflicting moral claims. Even philosophers who claim to be suspicious of most relativist conclusions—Richard Rorty and Bernard Williams are notable examples may accept relativist characterizations of the implications of moral diversity and disagreement. Many of these thinkers go on to question whether there is any point to moral philosophy, which is believed to rest on the hope of finding, or sometimes "constructing," just such a point of view. Alongside the skepticism derived from the model of contemporary natural science, then, a relativism rooted in the claims of empirical social science has also raised powerful doubts about the point and the possibility of philosophical moral inquiry.

These skeptical positions, moreover, share a powerful discontent about the persistence of serious moral disagreement. In this volume I show that this discontent rests on misconceptions of the nature of moral inquiry, the requirements of objectivity, and the concept of culture. To that end, I engage in what can be called "fieldwork" in the complex intellectual culture from which all of these misconceptions emerge: a scrutiny of the shared beliefs, assumptions, and methods of argument that underwrite contemporary skepticism about moral objectivity and moral inquiry.<sup>2</sup> I then provide an account of the connections between morality, culture, and philosophical moral inquiry that is rich enough to show why taking moral disagreement seriously does not require skep-

ticism about moral objectivity or about the value of moral philosophy to everyday moral reflection.

For philosophers, much of my argument—for example, my scrutiny of debates between emotivism and critics of emotivism such as Alasdair MacIntyre—involves fieldwork in familiar places. Yet while I explore familiar philosophical territory in this work, sometimes I also seek to make the familiar unfamiliar. In particular, I challenge several claims about morality and moral argument often defended by philosophers as "obvious." Thus, for instance, I argue that familiar claims about the intrinsic "infirmity," in Quine's phrase, of the methods of moral inquiry rest on implausible conceptions of agreement in science and of the relation of moral inquiry to experience. I also take issue with those philosophers who think it self-evident that rationally irresolvable moral disagreements are an unavoidable fact of experience. According to some philosophers, even some non-relativistic moral pluralists such as Isaiah Berlin, it is intellectually "immature" to think otherwise. But the conception of rationality presupposed by this claim, and its underlying understanding of what it means to resolve any disagreement rationally, are deeply problematic. Still another confusion in moral philosophy arises from frequent appeals to what "we" think about morality, and to "our" moral intuitions, that fail to explain why a particular moral concept or intuition should be embraced as "ours," or to clarify how the identity of the relevant "we" might be determined. Ironically, this tendency is sometimes most evident in relativist moral philosophy, which might be expected to be more attentive to the need to explain and clarify such claims about what "we" think. Thus, for instance, Gilbert Harman and David Wong claim that moral relativism best explains "our intuitions" about moral disagreement and diversity without considering that they might be addressing an audience that does not share their intuitions about the implications of serious moral disagreement.<sup>3</sup> More generally, philosophers are often tempted to confuse intuitions shaped by their narrowly philosophical concerns with intuitions shaped by the non-philosophical cultures which most people inhabit.

The foundational assumptions and methods of empirical anthropology are part of the intellectual culture from which moral relativism emerges. I show, in fact, that even some philosophical moral relativisms

which purport to transcend assumptions about cultural diversity can be seen to depend on them nonetheless. Yet those who defend conclusions rooted in relativist claims from anthropology—whether knowingly or not—have rarely examined the foundations of their skeptical commitments. I challenge these allegedly empirical foundations by challenging several of the most influential methods and assumptions that have shaped empirical anthropology—in the works of, among others, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Ruth Benedict, Melville Herskovits, and Margaret Mead. Some moral philosophers may wonder, however, why a philosophical examination of the roots of skepticism about morality and moral philosophy should devote so much attention to a detailed scrutiny of the claims of empirical anthropology regarding cultural difference. My answer to this important question is fourfold.

First, contemporary philosophical discussions of moral diversity and disagreement frequently appeal to conclusions from empirical anthropology that—as I will show—rest on questionable non-empirical assumptions about culture, human agency, and the problems and possibilities of moral language. Contemporary discussions of philosophical relativism continue to rely on these assumptions, yet virtually no philosophical attention has been devoted to questioning the conclusions which derived from them.<sup>4</sup> The failure to scrutinize influential claims drawn from empirical anthropology is especially pointed in the "rationality and relativism" debates that continue to shape philosophical discussion about the nature of social science.<sup>5</sup> Such debates typically begin by rounding up the usual suspects in descriptive anthropology, with no attention to the non-empirical (and sometimes quite implausible) assumptions about cultural difference on which many of the most debated ethnographic claims were based. Many of those claims—for instance, about the nature of particular "primitive" beliefs, or about whether members of "traditional" societies are able to question cultural traditions-are not securely grounded in cultural observation. A host of non-empirical assumptions about the nature of cultural differences will be at work in any seemingly "neutral" ethnographic account, and these assumptions are properly the subject of philosophical scrutiny, which this book undertakes.

Second, it has become a commonplace, both in and outside of philosophy, that taking moral diversity and disagreement seriously re-

quires (perhaps means) taking "culture" seriously—an enterprise most obviously associated with anthropology. Many philosophers assume, moreover, that the empirical claims of influential ethnographies have conclusively established the truth of several forms of relativism. Evans-Pritchard's work on the Azande, largely through the influence of Peter Winch's appeals to his writings, has been especially important in this regard. Moreover, many quite recent defenses of relativism-for instance, David Wong's defense of moral relativism and the arguments of David Bloor for cognitive relativism—contend that Evans-Pritchard has successfully shown that different societies accept radically different conceptions of rationality. But, once again, the empirical claims of the classic ethnographies rest on methodological assumptions that properly invite a philosophical scrutiny that they have not received. Indeed, many foundational methodological assumptions of early twentiethcentury anthropology originate in philosophy, from Herder's eighteenth-century arguments about the "genius of a people" to the social philosophy of pragmatists such as John Dewey and G. H. Mead. Anthropological thinking about relativism is thus one of the most important intersections of morality, culture, and philosophy. Only by scrutinizing that intersection can one see that taking moral diversity seriously does not entail relinquishing confidence in the objectivity of moral inquiry and the usefulness of philosophical moral inquiry.

Third, there is a powerful irony—one with special point for moral philosophers—in the fact that anthropology has succeeded in independently reinforcing skepticisms that are so closely linked with confidence in the natural sciences. For the question whether anthropology is properly construed as continuous with the natural sciences—indeed, whether it is a science at all—remains a topic of heated debate. Debate about the status of anthropology continues, moreover, despite the efforts of its early twentieth-century practitioners to defend its claims as a science. Thus, for instance, while Benedict confidently proclaimed in *Patterns of Culture* (1934) to have discovered pristine "laboratories" for the study of social forms, Clifford Geertz's more recent contentions that anthropology is a humanistic, interpretive discipline exemplify ongoing resistance to the scientific pretensions of anthropology.<sup>6</sup> Yet anthropology has nonetheless managed to set many of the terms of twentieth-century debate about moral diversity and disagreement,

even in a cultural climate that is increasingly inhospitable to any discipline that cannot unambiguously demonstrate technical success as a "science."

What accounts for the extraordinary influence of anthropology's claims in spite of such challenges to its authority as a science? The main explanation, I think, is that (at least for the first half of the twentieth century) anthropologists managed to keep alive a tradition of general intellectual discourse, whereby at least some of its claims remained accessible and compelling to a larger intellectual audience. It did so, moreover, at a time when philosophy was effectively in retreat from engagement with the concerns of that audience. Aver's expressions of emotivism have had some impact outside philosophy (owing largely to their intellectual brashness and bravado), yet ironically emotivism ultimately denied that philosophy might have anything meaningful to say about the substantive moral concerns of everyday moral inquirers. Emotivism is not the only culprit in this matter; the professionalization of Anglo-American philosophy had already begun a tradition of philosophical disengagement from everyday moral reflection.<sup>7</sup> In response to that estrangement, some contemporary philosophers have expressed concern that literate, morally engaged non-specialists generally lack interest in contemporary moral philosophy. But if moral philosophy is to reclaim a broader cultural influence, it is necessary to ask why other disciplines—not just anthropology but literature and history as well have managed to capture the moral imagination of vast numbers of non-specialists, and thereby to help set the terms of popular as well as philosophical debate about central concerns of moral inquiry.

The cultural ascendancy of anthropology leads to the fourth reason for scrutinizing its claims in such detail. Anthropological claims about morality and culture will help determine the future of public moral discourse—and thus ultimately the future of much meaningful philosophical moral inquiry. Anthropological theories propounding the importance of culture have given rise to the notion that cultures have moral standing, and thereby helped shape much contemporary moral and political debate. Arguments about multiculturalism, most notably, defend the collective moral and political claims of groups asserting a collective cultural identity. In addition, arguments about rights of cultural survival and the moral importance of cultural diversity have pro-

foundly altered the moral and political discourse that shapes international relations. Still further, the concept of cultural property underwrites specific claims for the return of cultural treasures—such as the Greeks' demand for the return of the Elgin marbles-and raises questions about the morality of collecting and displaying another culture's artifacts as a way of expressing appreciation for culture in general. But the relativism derived from conventional anthropological assumptions about culture rarely acknowledges that many of these assumptions are incompatible with defenses of the moral claims of cultures. Adequate philosophical understanding of such claims depends crucially on philosophical scrutiny of anthropological assumptions about culture.

Such scrutiny reveals, as I indicate in Chapters 1 and 2, that serious misconceptions and implausible assumptions underwrite relativist claims about the nature of cultural diversity in moral practices. In Chapter 1 I show that a fundamental premise of the most compelling arguments for moral relativism is a seldom discussed doctrine—a doctrine most informatively characterized as descriptive cultural relativism which asserts that cultural differences in moral beliefs may generate "ultimate" moral disagreements. Descriptive cultural relativism purports to make a neutral empirical observation about the nature of serious cross-cultural moral conflict. But that allegedly empirical claim embodies several implausible non-empirical assumptions about cultures, and these mistakes are primarily a function of inadequate attention to the internal complexity of cultures. I show that this internal complexity consistently thwarts relativist efforts to confine moral judgments to a single culture: cultural boundaries are not morally impenetrable walls. I argue, further, that an unfamiliar judgment or belief can be a moral judgment or belief-and can be recognized as such-only if it fits into a complex set of beliefs and judgments that strongly resembles one's own "familiar" set. Thus I contend that serious cross-cultural moral disagreement is possible only against a background of basic crosscultural agreement on a substantial number of fundamental moral judgments and beliefs. My arguments ultimately suggest that the most compelling and influential moral relativisms fail to take cross-cultural moral disagreement seriously because they rely on methodological assumptions which mask the conditions that make cross-cultural moral agreement possible.

In Chapter 1 I am concerned primarily with relativism about moral conflict between roughly contemporaneous cultures. In Chapter 2 we see that attempts to treat historical epochs as impenetrable to contemporary moral criticism rest on equally indefensible assumptions about culture and moral disagreement. In a wide array of contemporary intellectual debate, thinkers often extend relativist hypotheses about moral diversity to the understanding of historical reflection, defending a relativism of "historical distance"—in Bernard Williams's phrase which seeks to shield past practices from contemporary moral reflection and criticism. In a familiar example, some historians have claimed that contemporary readers cannot fault Thomas Jefferson for being a slaveholder—in spite of his defense of equality—because to do so is to judge him according to standards that do not apply to the past (Wilson 1992).8 But the view that historical boundaries are not morally penetrable is also undermined by the complexity of human cultures. I show in Chapter 2, moreover, that historical relativism—perhaps even more than relativism about contemporaneous cultures—presupposes indefensibly deterministic conceptions of culture and implausible notions of the possibility of radical moral change and invention.

Morally speaking, there is never anything fundamentally "new" in a new historical epoch. Rather, new and different ways of articulating and interpreting fundamental moral ideas can illuminate features of the moral world obscured or disguised by old interpretations. Any human being who learns a natural language, I argue, is capable of reinterpreting the moral ideas revealed by historical reflection so as to become a potentially authoritative moral critic of past practices and beliefs. In examining the assumptions and methods of empirical anthropology and philosophy that inform the contrary view, I also devote attention to important historiographic debates about the application of familiar moral categories to the understanding of New World slavery. These debates are of special interest to philosophers, especially in light of claims by several contemporary moral realists that social change sometimes derives from the sudden perception of previously unnoticed "moral facts" and "moral properties." I show that such claims rest, perhaps unexpectedly, on the misconceptions implicit in the relativism of historical distance, and that they do not stand up to critical scrutiny. In Chapter 2 I also set down some requirements that any adequate