"teacher" and "schoolteacher" being equated. An exalted rhetoric surrounds the work of schoolteaching, which only frustrates dedicated schoolteachers. Why cannot we just say: teachers are responsible for teaching; students are responsible for learning. In a classroom, the professional schoolteacher is responsible for one very specific kind of teaching; the student is responsible for a corresponding kind of learning. That would lead to more reflection on the nature of teaching, including the activity of classroom teaching.

CHAPTER 8

RELATIVELY RESPONSIBLE

This concluding chapter addresses the question of a universal ethic, one that transcends national, racial, religious, and cultural differences. No one today is in a position to write such an ethic. The deficiency is not an individual failing. The ground for something approaching a universal ethic would have to be prepared for by longstanding cultural exchanges. This preparatory stage has not happened. Jet planes, financial markets, computers, movies, sports, television programs, rock concerts, and other international phenomena may be hastening the arrival of a worldwide culture, but human beings need time to develop working relations, not to mention ease in living together as relatives.

Any individual or small working-group that proposes a universal ethic has to state it in a particular language. German, French, English, Spanish, or another language has built-in strengths but inevitable limitations. Each language bears traces of philosophical, religious, political, and scientific debates that have occurred in that language. Translations into another language can convey the literal meanings, but the new house of meaning has distances and ambiguities not in the original.

If individuals or groups try to leave behind the cultural peculiarities of their own life, they may succeed in writing a general ethic but not a universal ethic. A general ethic abstracts from all individual cases in search of a highest (or a lowest) common denominator. Such an ethic offers guidance to no one, not even the people who have composed it. Mary Midgley has said that "the sad little joke about universal languages is that almost no one speaks them." I would qualify that statement to say "languages that have claimed to be universal." We do not
have any universal languages, just someone's attempt to invent a universal language.

Gottfried Leibniz in the seventeenth century believed that his attempt would produce a universal language that "will be very difficult to construct but very easy to learn. It will be quickly accepted by everybody on account of its great utility and its surprising facility, and it will serve wonderfully in communication among various peoples." Leibniz, despite his genius, was taking on more than one expert can accomplish. Similar attempts down to Esperanto in the twentieth century have not been successful either.

The most likely candidate for approaching universality at the end of the twentieth century is English, which is far removed from the logical and simple way of communicating that Leibniz had in mind. If English ever does spread everywhere, it is unlikely to replace native languages. As a second language, it is already spoken in strange dialects that may create more than one English. Even the military and economic might of the United States, as successor to the British Empire, cannot control how people will develop the "American heritage of the English language."

A truly universal language would enhance not suppress local particularity. The movement from individual to general is by way of abstraction. But the movement from particular toward the universal is by deeper immersion into the particular. At least for now, and probably forever, the universal is available only by being glimpsed in the particular; it cannot be captured. To hope for a fully formed universal language is unrealistic.

The arts, throughout the centuries, have provided intimations of universal truth, goodness, and beauty. Great works of art have universality in the sense that someone of any age or circumstances might be personally moved by the experience of the work. Northrop Frye, commenting on Macbeth, writes: "If you wish to know the history of eleventh-century Scotland, look elsewhere; if you wish to know what it means to gain a kingdom and lose one's soul, look here." Macbeth, Faust, or Don Quixote is not everyday; but men and women throughout the centuries have discovered parts of themselves in great characters of literature or in great portraits on canvas.

This approach to universality suggests why ethical systems are impossible to carry off. The attempt to compose a system of rules for everybody to live by begins from an arrogant premise. Nobody wants to be a piece of someone else's system. Moral rules that attempt to govern human actions are experienced by some people at times as a prison. When there is rebellion against such confining rules, the response may be to lift the rules to the level of general principle. Acceptance of principles makes agreements easier, but principles do not have much effect on action. Practically no one opposes principles such as "people should be honest" or "people should be truthful."

In the present era, principles are often translated into "values." Agreement on the value of honesty is nearly universal. But what it means to be honest in a particular situation, let alone how to produce honest people, is unclear. We seem stuck with, on the one side, rules and codes that are not accepted; and, on the other side, we have principles and values that are easily accepted but ineffective in practice.

The twentieth-century alternative to this dilemma has been to deny the need for a universal ethic. It is claimed that each group of people has its own ideas of right and wrong. Therefore, we should live by whatever rules and principles make sense to us and not intrude our morality on other groups that have a different morality. These days, however, this alternative is having its own difficulties; both its logical consistency and its practical effectiveness are in question.

The argument of this book is that a grammar of responsibility offers a corrective to this twentieth-century alternative. Responsibility is on the side of a denial that there are any absolute standards which could dictate a universal morality. However, responsibility is also a denial of the sufficiency of a relativism that dismisses the question of universality. Responsibility is rooted in the particular, but that does not preclude a move toward a more universal ethic than any that the world now possesses.

Responsibility thus functions as a bridge for the fifth and last division in this book: absolute versus relative. Any help that responsibility
can offer here presumes the previous four discussions. That is, if responsibility bridges the divisions of is and ought, individual and collective, humans and nonhumans, past and future, then it encompasses a rich particularity to approach the issue of universality. In contrast, if responsibility is simply a principle or a value ("People should take responsibility for themselves" or "People should make responsible decisions"), then no one is likely to object to its inclusion in a general ethic for worldwide distribution, but it will remain one of many such abstractions.
Responsibility is not enough, as I have readily admitted from the beginning. I have argued that it is a promising entry point for how to speak ethically, no less and no more. Progress in moral language is not likely to lead to a system of morality, in a form that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries envisioned. Nonetheless, a science of ethics on the model of seventeenth-century science still has nostalgic attraction. A science wants its truths to apply to all people at all times and in all places. But the claim to scientific precision in ethics is always threatened by groups who simply will not fit themselves into the system.

We cannot return to a premodern age, but the meaning of "postmodern" can include a rediscovery of premodern as a place we can learn from. The twentieth-century acceptance of a morality relative to each culture is in a way a rediscovery of ancient times. A school of philosophy was once a way of life with its own beliefs, rituals, and behavior. Similarly, religious communities were groups of people joined by the same *curriculum vitae.* St. Paul did not write ethical treatises; he addressed communities in Galatia, Corinth and Rome. To understand the moral teaching in these letters, one has to know something about the culture of the cities of Galatia, Corinth, and Rome, as well as the history of the Christian movement in those places. As with the rabbis before him, Paul’s moral directives were not universal rules of conduct, but insinuations that people live up to what they had previously promised.

Aristotle’s ethics had more impulse toward a philosophical universality. His treatises, nonetheless, were addressed to people already living in ethical communities. His contention that the way to become virtuous is to grow up in a virtuous community can be ridiculed as circular thinking; but it says something profound about community, teaching, and the ethical life. Much of what Aristotle says about the virtues does not speak to us precisely because it was so relevant to the culture in which and for which he wrote. The details of a virtuous life do not travel well from one era to another, or even from one culture to another within the same era.

That fact does not mean that different eras or several cultures are incomparable. Each group does distinguish between what is good, exemplary, and worth preserving from what is bad, condemnable, and deserving of elimination. We may not know the proper ways to carry out a detailed comparison, but comparability remains a human possibility. Most philosophical schools and religious communities in the distant past presumed that their own *ethos* was the standard for comparison. Their own morality was an absolute or a near absolute to which the foreigner was compared and by which the foreigner was judged. This chauvinistic element in the standard of comparison should not obscure the fact that the comparison indicated acceptance of others as part of a human community.

It was a momentous decision in the sixteenth century when the Spanish authorities ruled that the American Natives had souls. The Spanish invaders of Mexico had been horrified at the Aztec practice of human sacrifice—and with good reason. Bernard Williams comments: "It would surely be absurd to regard the reaction as merely parochial or self-righteous. It rather indicated something which their conduct did not indicate, that they regarded the Indians as men rather than wild animals." Comparisons were both possible and inevitable so long as one assumed that human nature was present.

A European thinker of the sixteenth or seventeenth century could hardly imagine that the natives of America, Asia, or Africa were morally superior to him. Some eighteenth-century thinkers were open to admiring particular traits and skills of primitive peoples. They were especially fascinated by the innocent side of the American native, what Europeans understood as "natural man." The Europeans recognized that something valuable might have been lost in the course of civilization. Nonetheless, "civilization" was itself a recently coined word to indicate moral superiority. As heir to Greek, Roman, Hebrew, Christian, and Arab influences, Europe had sprang ahead in its mastery of science and technology. Eventually, 85 percent of the earth would be under its control, before the tide receded. Its morality was assumed to be the standard or absolute against which any other claim had to be measured.

The first chapter of Paul Johnson’s *Modern Times* is entitled “A Relativist World.” It starts from Einstein’s meaning of relativity, but it goes on to describe how Marxism and Freudian analysis undermined “the highly developed sense of personal responsibility, and of duty towards a settled and objectively true moral code, which was at the center of nineteenth-century European civilization.” That simple statement is a key to the confusion, uncertainty, and chaos of the twentieth century, not only in a science of ethics, but in every facet of life. Without a standard by which to compare, comparison seemed impossible; without comparison, intelligibility disappears. Starting with evi-
dence from history and archeology that human nature is more diverse than had hitherto been suspected, many anthropologists and philosophers in the twentieth century went on to the conclusion that there is no such thing as human nature.8

This position is sometimes called “cultural relativism,” although that phrase slides around in meaning. In the nineteenth century, the term “culture” had been synonymous with education. The most influential writer on this subject, Matthew Arnold, defined culture as “acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world.”9 In the twentieth century, anthropologists taught everyone to use “culture” to mean a group’s particular way of life. Evaluation of culture as good or bad, superior or inferior, became highly problematic. Some anthropologists looked for universal laws in these newly discovered “cultures.” But as finding universals became less likely, a relativizing of standards set in. Each culture sets its own standards; the outsider has no right to pass moral judgments.

This attitude of tolerance has much to recommend it as superior to previous chauvinisms. Still, there is a near contradiction in saying that a position is superior because it refuses to deal in superior/inferior. The anthropologist’s appreciation of culture embodies a distinct moral attitude. A European or North American visitor ought not to rush in on an African tribe or South Pacific island to start reforming it on the model of the “advanced world.” Nevertheless, the simple refusal of a single, absolute standard was not an answer to how various cultures are to work out moral differences when cultures interact.

That is where the world increasingly finds itself at the end of the twentieth century: absolutes have crumbled while “relative,” as a description of morality, suffers from a previous disparagement as less than absolute. Several forms of authoritarian government have tried to fill the vacuum of Europe’s withdrawal from empire. Communism was the most durable of these new absolutes. It not only provided stability for a large part of the world; it also provided the opposition with a nearly absolute ideology of anticommunism. The savage competition between the United States and the Soviet Union (obviously there could not be two absolutes) led to the exhaustion of both. Neither of them could provide an absolute standard for the rest of the world, although “America” is sometimes put forward that way.

The end of the Cold War released new energies within the former Soviet empire. Some of that energy took the form of ancient religious

and ethnic conflict. The criminal element surfaced to exercise its own absolute standard. The Russian murder rate quickly achieved parity with that of the United States. Disorder is more frightening when people have had a very orderly way of life. Struggles in the former provinces and the disaster in Chechnya proved disheartening.

What transpired in the former Yugoslavia with the collapse of the old system is especially frightening. Neither the warring parties nor outside forces seemed able to make much sense of the slaughter. Marshall Tito and Soviet power had maintained the artificial unity of a country that was not a nation but an assemblage of ethnic and religious groups. Perhaps with sufficient time and intelligent mediation some peaceful divisions might have been reached. Multicultural havens, such as Sarajevo, might have provided models of success for the future. The fragility of any new order was overwhelmed by a paroxysm of hatred, greed, and violence.

A Relational World

The chaotic condition in numerous places can understandably lead to nostalgia for an old order when the streets were safe, the trains were on time, and refugees were not crossing the border. George Bush’s proclamation of a new world order can sound like a sick joke. Nevertheless, the world does not seem to have any other choice than to begin working toward a new order, governed not by one absolute to which all others are relative, but by all being relatives.

The term “relative” ceases to have a secondary or negative meaning if there is not an absolute standard of measure. In fact, relative then becomes one of the most positive words in the language. The moral choice is no longer between absolutist and relativist, the latter taken to mean no standards at all. The choice now is between withdrawal into isolation and a broadening, deepening relation to all. “A person is a fellow being before it is a being.”10 To be moral is to recognize our relation to all other creatures and to live accordingly. In this new order, there are numerous standards and discriminations one is called upon to observe in our relational endeavors. No handbook or set of regulations provides mechanical and certain answers for moral living. An educated conscience that listens and answers is the chief moral guide.

Many people would like to hold on to a secure footing while they try
out a relational morality. But as Kierkegaard insisted, you cannot try floating on the waves while you keep one big toe on the ocean floor. There are rules of operation for the swimmer, but most of them are learned in swimming. We might wish we had more time to wade, but we have been pushed into Kierkegaard’s “70,000 fathoms.” The choice is to sink in search of a new absolute or else learn how to swim. Neither proposal is inviting but only the latter is life giving.

The moral rules of operation are aspects, objectifications, reminders of relations between human and human, human and nonhuman. We will be impelled to a common search only if we give up reliance on absolutes. As Gandhi said, “how can he who thinks he possesses absolute truth be fraternal?” The trouble with most “fraternal” quests in the past is that they have smuggled in pseudo-absolutes that interfere with genuine reciprocity of relations. An absolutizing trend is present in the way language functions, lifting up one group or one ideal to the exclusion of others. Does even the term “fraternal” include all that Gandhi and other revolutionaries have intended? Does it not have to be a sorority as well as a fraternity of truth seekers?

This question is not smugly asked to imply that we now finally do have an all-inclusive language. Every statement includes and excludes at the same time. There are no absolutely inclusive statements that include all relatives. In a relational world, one must continually ask “who is now being included and who is now being excluded?” and “is this the best accommodation for these circumstances?”

In recent years, the phrase “inclusive language” has been narrowly used as if “gender inclusive” were the only issue of inclusivity, and as if there were a set of one-time corrections. The question of inclusive/exclusive is at the heart of language; it is not a problem to be solved by a few additions and abstractions. The attempt to make universal statements often leads only to general statements, whose breadth is at the expense of depth and concreteness. Poetic speech with attention to concrete detail has a high degree of universality. In contrast, bureaucratic statements are highly inclusive by being general: they flatten out all the differences.

If moral language is to be both concrete and inclusive, that can only emerge as particular men and women listen to human and nonhuman interlocutors. Any one act of listening, any one statement, any one action is morally circumscribed by its historical situation. A man may use his moral passion to get a street light installed for the safety of a dozen school children. Another man may expend his energy on cleaning out a channel of water so that a school of fish does not die of pollution. A woman may spend her early evening hours delivering sandwiches to homeless people in her neighborhood.

Is this any way to run a new world order? Yes and no. Any act of listening to one’s immediate surroundings and taking the immediate action that seems demanded could be a diversion from seeing the big picture. Still, in the absence of what Pasternak describes as “the kind of heart that knows of no general cases, but only of particular ones, and has the greatness of small actions,” the big reforms go awry. Someone ought to be working to get homes for the homeless, but simultaneously someone has to help those who are currently homeless to get through the night. The two “someones” can be the same person; in fact, in some way a person has to participate in both cases. However, that does not mean that everyone must split his or her time down the middle. Talent and circumstance should help to decide the most intelligent use of one’s resources.

Although the responsible act of listening and answering is always concretely embodied in one person, at one time, in one place, there is no inherent limit either to the distance of what is listened to or the extent of the reverberations in the answer. The oft-quoted slogan of former House Speaker Tip O’Neill that “all politics is local” contains an obvious truth along with disastrously misleading implications. Any genuine political act is located in a small group with one location. But unless the action is to be quickly corrupted, it has to draw some of its wisdom from beyond the immediate locality and it has to answer for actions that ripple outward to city, nation, and world. By being deeply local, all politics has to be as universal as possible.

People in small, like-minded groups find it easy enough to be responsible to each other and with each other. Responsibility does include responding to family members, friends, or lovers. We learn to work at harder cases of listening while we refresh ourselves with the unstressful rhythms of friendship and love. Two people who intimately know each other can listen to one another though hardly any words are spoken.

In small enclaves based on a common note of religion, race, sex, ethnicity, and dozens of other bases, communication is similarly smooth.
No one has to say what everyone assumes as the basis of the community. What is heard and what is answered lie within the group's culture. By written or unwritten agreements, some things are just not said. What is said within the group is accorded the benefit of the doubt, that is, it is given a positive interpretation. The same statement from an outsider is heard differently. Humor is a main test: the insider's joke is an outsider's insult.

Some people may be longing for the day when all these insides and outsides disappear, to be replaced by a world of individuals without clusters of race, nationality, religion, and the rest. Such a dissolution is highly unlikely and would not be progress. The small enclaves are the source of much trouble, but it is the basis of much of the richness of human existence. The uniqueness of the human being lies not in the one note of humanity but in the combination of innumerable qualities. The human race is a plurality of uniquenesses, each person the seat of characteristics for many groupings. Each group can become a closed bastion of defense against other differences. However, each group can earn the name "community" by interacting with other groups in the direction of a richer humanity.13

The key to community and responsibility is the willingness to interact, which assumes that groups remain distinct but not separate. Instead of assuming that each culture has a different morality, we can begin by affirming our own morality, and let differences emerge as they may. When differences are apparent, then is the moment for quiet listening and an effort to understand the world from a perspective different from one's own. We need not abandon our own deeply held convictions in the process of trying to understand people who seem to be in fundamental disagreement with us. Eventually, we might find some common ground, and then argument can be fruitful. If we cannot find an agreed-upon starting point, then arguing is useless.

It is often said that one should not preach to the converted, but that is exactly who should be preached to because they share a common set of beliefs. Preaching to the unconverted is ineffective and insulting. Rational argument, as Wittgenstein points out, is a kind of conversion.14 Without a sharing of rational premises, neither agreement nor disagreement in words is possible. Long stretches of silence can be part of dialogue. Rituals indicating a let-live tolerance may be all that is possible for a day, a year, or a generation.

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Deep-rooted divisions undoubtedly exist in the world. When "culture" became such a common word early in this century, the chief division was between large parts of the world that had been isolated from each other for centuries. The "far East" (that is, far from England) was still a dark mystery to European traders and politicians. The religions of Asia were starkly different from the Jewish and Christian religions of Europe. Asia had not separated religion and philosophy into two neat packages as had seventeenth-century Europeans. Africa, too, was a "dark continent" with rituals and beliefs unintelligible to the first European invaders and colonialists. Christianity had little success at penetrating the Asian mind. Christian missionaries made a more concerted effort in Africa, and they obtained a foothold there. Still, the native cultures lived alongside or just underneath Christian attempts to "civilize" African tribes.

Much has changed in the course of the twentieth century, but not everything. The modern world has intruded almost everywhere; there are few places left to hide from it in Asia, Australia, or Africa. Religious missionaries are still at work, although these days they work with much greater sensitivity to the local culture. That has meant a reemergence of some ancient practices, not only in Africa but in Latin America and even in places such as Ireland.

The contemporary missionary, however, is more likely to be the rock star, the Hollywood movie, the sports hero, Time magazine, or the computer whiz. There now exists an international "pop culture" that has spread around the world, if not to every tribe and village. This culture is often looked upon with disdain by those who cherish an older meaning of (high) culture. Insofar as pop culture is driven by greed there is good cause for suspicion. At the least, however, it suggests that there are common links between cultures. The supposition that cultures are self-enclosed worlds, each with a moral system unintelligible to the outsider, is challenged by the way music, movies, clothes, sports, and television programs travel from culture to culture. Not all these things travel equally well. Some music remains distinctly local while a rock concert can attract tens of thousands, across a variety of languages. Humor usually has trouble traveling. The Tonight show would not play well in Tibet, but it also never succeeded in England.
The big drawback in this new missionary outreach is that it remains largely one-sided. The modern world still intrudes upon the premodern. Most of the Christian missionaries in the world come from the United States. The new missionaries of film and recording are just as heavily concentrated in the United States, especially in New York and Los Angeles. Cultural influence today is backed by economic power. A reciprocal cultural influence is difficult to achieve between large, rich nations and those nations struggling to get in on the money that circles the globe twenty-four hours a day. The powerful players in the economic game are often called the "West," a term that illogically includes Japan. Do Great Britain, Germany, Japan, and the United States have a common ethic? They apparently have much in common in the understanding of economic benefits, but cultural differences remain. Japan absorbed a lot of United States culture after World War II. But millennia of differences between East and West do not disappear in one, sudden burst.

In E. S. C. Northrop's great work of a half-century ago, The Meeting of East and West, he employed the terms "aesthetic" and "theoretic" to contrast Eastern and Western cultures. Rather than assume the two to be permanently split that way, he argued for the spread of Western scientific method in the East. That change has continued to happen throughout this century. In the other direction, Northrop argued for a recovery by the West of the aesthetic component of knowledge. In connection with this recovery, he argued that there had been a historical mistake at the beginning of the modern West. "The problem underlying the conflicting Western cultures is identical with the one involved in relating correctly the compatible cultures of the East and West." That is, an opening to the East, far from being a rejection of the West, would heal the split in the West between modern and premodern.

Much that has happened in the ensuing half century supports this premise. The words "modern" and "scientific" can no longer be assumed without question to mean "superior." But for the West to turn its back on modern science would be to no one's benefit. Instead, perhaps real reciprocity is becoming possible. The aesthetic and ethical standards of various peoples, say the Maori of New Zealand, need not be judged either inferior or superior to the Pakeha (white people). In reciprocal relations, the point is simply to listen to and to learn from each other.

The aversion to issuing judgments of inferiority does not require a group to keep silent on moral issues. In the face of what appears to be grave injustice, the outsider shows respect by disagreeing. It sounds tolerant to say that the morality of each culture can be judged only from within that culture. Suppose, however, that one culture's morality includes "we kill people who disagree with us." A tolerance for that kind of cultural difference would eventually lead to the end of tolerance. Somewhere there is a limit as to how far cultures can disagree.

No culture allows indiscriminate killing. No culture can permit indiscriminate falsehood. Those two principles may not seem to go far since the term "indiscriminate" admits of endless arguments. Nonetheless, argument is itself indicative that there is some underlying agreement. Cultures are shown to be morally comparable because in each of them governments and individuals are required to judge which cases of killing and falsehood are allowable. Every culture allows some killing and every culture allows some falsehood. Where a culture draws those lines can seem shockingly immoral to another culture.

For example, throughout history, infanticide has been a quite common practice. Under such and such conditions, the newborn's life could be ended. In some cultures, a deformed baby is judged to be not human so that killing it is not murder. In many cultures, ending an infant's life may be preferable to exposing it to terrible sufferings. Today, infanticide is thought to be a terrible crime, although contemporary medicine is creating situations where it is sometimes judged better to let the newborn die. Direct killing would still be a crime, but similar to cases of dying in old age, the line between letting die and killing is not always clear.

People who consider abortion a terrible crime believe that in the future the line for allowable killing will be moved back. Animal rights advocates think the line should be moved beyond the human. The Jains, a religious group in India, think that plucking fruit from a tree or washing oneself is inadmissible killing. Not only between cultures but within cultures there are sincere and genuine disagreements about where to draw the line between those killings allowed and those that are not.

As one moves outward from the proscription of indiscriminate killing and falsehood, the room for disagreement becomes greater. That people should not be tortured and that people should not be imprisoned without a due process receive almost universal assent.
However, judgments in a particular situation vary as to how such principles apply. If any kind of physical punishment is allowed, the exact conditions of who, how, where, and to whom have to be carefully stipulated. A parent spanking a child and a policeman beating up a suspect are worlds apart within the same culture.

Every culture needs ways to restrain wrongdoers, but a government’s power to arrest and to imprison is always susceptible to terrible abuse. Our legal system may have become skewed away from reaching justice for the victim of crime; if so, careful reforms are called for rather than wholesale overriding of the rights of the accused. Cultures draw different lines on these matters, but the first thing to notice is the existence of lines and not just differences in where they are placed. Ethical differences between cultures can be compared and should be compared. How to carry out the comparing may require careful distinctions.

A particular case that has stirred up strong emotions across cultures is a practice in Africa called “clitoridectomy,” “female circumcision,” or “genital mutilation.” How a moral issue is named is half the issue. Discussion of this issue raises questions of tribe, race, religion, and gender. Christian missionaries in Kenya were horrified at the practice; in the 1930s they preached against it but to little avail. The practice seems to have some strong cultural roots. That means to change the practice would involve many other changes in the culture. An outsider may not be able to grasp these interconnections.¹⁹

A number of people in the West (Alice Walker is one of the most prominent) have taken up as a cause the elimination of the practice.²⁰ The United States government has also become involved. In return, complaints of cultural imperialism have been raised: “Why doesn’t the United States put its own house in order before telling Africans how to act?”

The question of responsibility that most interests me here is who does the listening and speaking. Can only Africans speak to this issue or are African Americans allowed? Or perhaps only African and African American women? Do white women have as much right to speak as black men? Or does neither qualify unless they are Muslim? Should the United States get out of the way and let the United Nations handle the question? But is not the United Nations suspected of being unduly influenced by the United States on such matters?

One is tempted to dismiss all such questions as irrelevant to moral law. However, if the world is to move toward a universal morality that arises from reciprocal exchanges, then who speaks and where they speak are indeed relevant questions. The principle needs defending that no one should be forbidden to express a view; there are no unbridgeable gulfs of understanding between genders, races, or nationalities. However, in any emotionally charged case there are some groups more appropriate than others for speaking in public forums. International women’s groups have a right to protest cultural practices in places where women have suffered silently for centuries. In the present example, it would be helpful to hear Muslim spokespersons distinguish this practice from the practice of Islam. Groups of African women, perhaps with support from African American women, would seem to be the most appropriate groups to take the lead if protest is warranted.²¹

The mention of Islam’s crucial part in this case should be broadened to a recognition of innumerable other moral situations where Islam can be of great help. One could never guess from news accounts in the United States that Islam is one of the great moral forces in the world and potentially is a much greater force. As a religion passionately held and deeply embodied, it almost inevitably has a fringe element that is dangerous. However, the overwhelming majority of Muslims lead upstanding moral lives. When Islam provides the first real basis of moral dignity for prisoners in the United States, that is considered a peculiar aberration. But providing moral stability is what Islam does throughout the world.

The assumption that people vary so much from culture to culture that a transcultural morality is impossible was challenged by Christianity as it moved from a corner of Asia across Africa and into Europe. Islam’s immediate success was more spectacular in spreading through Africa, Asia and parts of Europe. This strongly moralistic religion continues to spread in all continents today.

Is Islam a bearer of “responsibility”? I have said that responsibility arose in a Jewish setting and was appropriated by Christianity. Islam is certainly compatible with the idea. Even more than Christianity, Islam is based on listening and responding to the spoken word (the Qur’an is a book not only dictated but one to be recited). And in Islam more than in Christianity, the response is always corporate. It is not a religion to be segregated to the privacy of individual life. Islam still has to contend with its crisis of modernity. Can it prosper not only in the
United States, Germany, and France but in Turkey, Pakistan, and Algeria? In a world where “modern” is no longer the last word, Islam could emerge from its struggles with modern culture stronger than ever.

I should note here in connection with Islam but also in relation to each of the great religions that the theme of this chapter—from an absolute to a relative morality—is not antireligious. On the contrary, the collapse of pseudo-absolutes is a liberating moment for religion. The most fundamental and universal religious doctrine is: No thing in experience is absolute. No thing and no human individual should be confused with God. It cannot be denied that religions in practice do idolize; a text or an individual gets equated with the divine. However, a prophetic strain runs throughout Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religions. The prophetic voice is always one of de-divinization. Christians believe that Jesus is the supreme manifestation of the divine in an individual life. Muslims believe that the holy Qur’an is a divine dictation. Nonetheless, the Christian, Muslim, or Jew has to await the completion of history for the whole truth to be revealed. As the mystics in all three religions have said, the “word of God” is always spoken now.

The Jew, Christian, and Muslim (as well as Buddhist, Sikh, and others) has to discover morality in relations. The responsibility to a final judgment has to be lived out patiently and discriminatingly. Morality is developed in the breadth and depth of corporate relations. The decalogue of Exodus or the commands of the Qur’an are indispensable guides in a Jewish or Muslim community. They are not universal rules that automatically solve moral dilemmas. Jews, Christians, and Muslims do make claim to following moral commands that embody universal moral truth. Their leaders are usually wise enough to realize that the commands as formulated cannot be imposed on others beyond the community. At the most, one can get at the universal truths only in negative form (‘don’t murder,’ ‘don’t bear false witness’). Other peoples may also get close to these universals with alternate formulas.

The moral road for religion is either to try escaping from body, time, and matter, trusting in an experience or a thing that is outside language. Or else, the road is deeper immersion into the relations of the temporal and bodily, trusting that the divine is glimpsed in the totality of all relations. Responsibility is in principle to everyone and everything, although a tradition highlights the most helpful standards of judgment. Within the tradition, as well as beyond it, much of the struggle is against any standard claiming to be the absolute and final answer. In Christianity, for example, the “unique Christ” is found only at the end of history when all things are taken up into Christ. Nothing from the past and no rulings of today can be absolute. The supreme moral guide is conscience: the capacity to listen carefully and then to answer on the basis of the best available evidence.

A century ago, the movement of de-absolutizing morality was already occurring. It was mistakenly thought to be the victory of secular enlightenment over reactionary religions. Today no one is as optimistic as was the great classical historian, James Bury, when he wrote: “The struggle of reason against authority has ended in what appears now to be a decisive and permanent victory for liberty.”24 Within a year of these words being published, Europe was engulfed in the most widespread and irrational war in history.

What should be clear at the end of the twentieth century is that Bury’s opposition of freedom and authority was tragically mistaken. Neither individual persons, nor nations, nor the world can get along without forms of authority. Persons are embodied elements within corporate structures. A person needs guidance from the past and opportunities for cooperative action in the present. People need to have some trust in the bodies governing their life and some hope of influencing them. The alternative to trust in one’s neighbors, respect for authority, and engagement in political life is an external force to maintain order. Authority, as Hannah Arendt was at pains to point out, is not a form of violence but the opposite of violence.25

Responsibility as Transcultural

A good test case for this chapter is whether “responsibility” is an intelligible and central concept in Japan. I have earlier pointed out that responsibility arose out of a Western religious setting. And although Greek philosophy did not have the concept, Greek ideas of individuality, rationality, and freedom coalesced with the metaphor of listening and answering. Can responsibility serve as a link between Eastern and Western cultures?

Hitoshi Motoshima, as noted previously, stirred up a furor when he said that the emperor bore some responsibility for the war. In a subsequent interview, he said: “In Europe, people’s feelings are based upon
centuries of philosophy and religion, but the Japanese only worship nature. . . . In a world ruled by nature, the question of individual responsibility doesn’t come up.”26 Perhaps significantly, Hitoshi Moto-shima is a Christian; one of his critics said he “had not behaved as a Japanese.” A Shinto priest wrote in criticism: “It is a common error among Christians and people with Western inclinations, including so-called intellectuals, to fail to grasp that Western societies and Japanese society are based on fundamentally different religious conceptions . . . Forgetting this premise, they attempt to place a Western structure on a Japanese foundation. I think this kind of mistake explains the demand for the emperor to bear full responsibility.”27

Although this exchange suggests a problem with “responsibility” being compatible with Japanese ethics, it should be remembered that it is a disagreement between Japanese speakers. It may be that the Japanese Christian is trying to import an idea that has been foreign to Japan and will remain so. One could speculate, however, that the difference lies within responsibility, that is, between two different meanings of responsibility. Hitoshi Motoshima’s complaint is a lack of individual responsibility. But as I pointed out in chapters 4 and 5, the term “individual” may create a contrast with “collective” that clouds the fact that persons are always corporately responsible. Possibly the Japanese would not only find corporate responsibility intelligible, they might be a help in teaching its meaning to the United States.

It should also be noticed that the Shinto priest rejected attributing full responsibility to the emperor. Hitoshi Motoshima had carefully and explicitly attributed only partial responsibility to the emperor. In addition to the criticism being inaccurate and unfair, it suggests that responsibility is not necessarily the issue so much as an individualistic idea of responsibility in which one official is deemed to bear full responsibility for a complex event.

Ian Buruma, in The Wages of Guilt, is very hard on the Japanese. Whereas he thinks that the Germans have been coming to terms with World War II, he thinks Japan has refused to accept its responsibility. Buruma interprets this difference to be based on the fact that Germany has been influenced by Christian ideas of responsibility and guilt. Japanese culture, in contrast, is based on shame, not guilt. Shame leads to a withdrawal and to covering what is exposed. No doubt there are some cultural differences concerning guilt and shame, but it would seem unwise to conclude that there is an unbridgeable gulf here.28

Perhaps as the scholar Keiichi Tsuneishi has argued, Germany was surrounded by neighbors that would not let it forget the past, while Japan was surrounded by many nations who were imposing brutal regimes of their own and not interested in bringing up a discussion of brutality.29 One should not overlook, however, the discussions of the Japanese Parliament in 1995, referred to in chapter 7; much of the argument was around the word responsibility. And although the ultimate acceptance of the term may reflect external pressure, it would seem extreme to continue to claim that “responsibility” is completely foreign to Japanese thinking.

World War II, still enveloped in strong emotions, may not be the best place to examine the question of Japanese responsibility. Current business practice may be a better test. The New York Times business section carried a study of business failure in the United States and Japan.30 One scholar says: “We talk about Japan as a collective society, and yet individuals there quickly take responsibility for corporate mistakes. By contrast, Americans are considered rugged individualists, yet we readily try to evade responsibility for mistakes.” This puzzle would be largely solved by understanding responsibility as neither individual nor collective. The Japanese have a sense of being corporately responsible, which is why they accept personal responsibility for failure. The U.S. businessman may call himself a “rugged individualist,” but that fantasy means that failure does not fit in his self-image. When failure happens, he certainly cannot bear full responsibility, so he flees.

Another commentator on U.S. business today says there is “an absolute absence of shame. People used to be embarrassed about either doing a bad job or having to do bad things to do a better job. I don’t see that anymore.” What is rightly suggested here is that “shame” need not be the opposite of guilt or responsibility. Shame played an important part in Western educational theory from John Locke to Erik Erikson.31 Like guilt, a little bit of shame goes a long way, and shame was overdone in educational theory and practice.32 Nevertheless, the nearly total removal of shame from Western countries leaves reason with little emotional support for doing the right action. A person who does something wrong should feel ashamed. Instead of shame being an insuperable barrier to understanding Japan, perhaps Japan could help Western countries to learn from their own history the need for a little shame in the child’s upbringing.33

My suggestion that responsibility is an idea of nearly universal
Relatively Responsible

applicability is an ambitious claim to make for any moral notion. However, anyone who rejects responsibility is faced with proposing an alternate starting point. Especially since the 1940s, with the Universal Declaration of Rights, almost all the trust has been placed in the idea of rights. Although I have no objection to rights, much of the world resents the imposition of what is thought to be a concept of modern Western philosophy. Even when the concept is theoretically acceptable, many nations still cannot follow the logic of Western rights. Why, for example, is the United States obsessed with a right to uncensored speech while seemingly not concerned with a right of everyone to get adequate food or a right to walk on streets free of gunfire? There may be a logic at work here, but it can be a puzzling one to outsiders.

I pointed out in chapter 3 that responsibility is not a parallel to rights but a precondition. Because people are responsible (ontologically and morally), the mutually related ideas of rights and obligations arise. Governments should indeed recognize the rights of people, but they will do that only if they are first responsible to their own people and responsible to the example of other nations. Governments that begin being “responsible to” get pushed toward recognizing rights. After the Soviet Union signed the Helsinki agreement in 1979, human rights advocates (the so-called Helsinki group) within the country got a footing for their movement and exercised real pressure on the government.34 One can see here some of the logic behind the United States’ near obsession with the right to uncensored speech.

I am not optimistic that the United States shouting “responsibility” instead of “rights” at China, Singapore, or Iran would be any more successful than it has been. The important point is that the United States should itself be more responsible to such countries and encourage a process of responsibility within these countries. Such encouragement need not exclude economic and political pressures. However, such a response would arise from listening to voices from within the country and from detailed information about the country rather than from approaching every country with a textbook statement on human rights.

It would probably be unwise to push the term “responsibility.” Whether or not the word translates easily into a language and culture, the idea can be nurtured by those who understand the grammar of the term. A nation that wishes to see other nations responsible can best exercise that influence by showing how it is done within its own borders. A responsible country is made up of communities that interact with each other and a government that is responsible to those communities.

Listening to the people is not a simple process, as the founders of the United States fully recognized and as emerging nations have discovered. A responsible government does not just act on whatever 51 percent of the population say they want at any moment. There has to be stability and continuity of law. A careful system of checks and balances needs to be in place to get at the deeper desires and more genuine wants. Electronic plebiscites, with everyone pushing a button on their T.V. remote, would not necessarily improve democracy. Moral responsibility requires depth as well as breadth. That depth is revealed in thoughtful, civic conversation between citizens who can agree to disagree.

Many commentators have bemoaned the decline of this culture in the United States. Its replacement is “interest groups” and opinion polls that do not look out for the good of the people as a whole. Despair at the possibility of a “multicommunity culture” leads to aggressive insistence on a “multicultural society.” In this latter, the government is arbitrator among the numerous cultures. Given the language of the twentieth century, one can, of course, describe the United States (as well as England, Canada, Germany, Australia, and new places every day) as “multicultural.” However, that fact does not dictate any single approach (“multiculturalism”) to education, business, or government.

A “responsibility to” entails respecting differences. Sometimes it is better to disregard differences, but first one has to regard before one can disregard. Seventy-five years ago in the United States, efforts were made to suppress all languages except English. The effect was an irresponsible destruction of valuable cultural elements. The alternative, however, does not require schools to give full and equal treatment to every linguistic heritage. New York City has 175 language groups.35 Its school system would collapse if it tried to provide instruction for each language group. The schools as well as other institutions could show respect for other languages, encourage all of the citizens to learn more than one language. Students could be encouraged to preserve and to cherish a language spoken at home, while at the same time they master English.
If curricula and textbooks try to attend to each “culture” in the United States, they may end by satisfying no one. The irony of attempts at a multicultural curriculum is that they invariably unleash complaints of groups being short-changed. If, for example, “African American” is one of a dozen or a hundred cultures studied, is that not subordinating the crucial part that blacks have played in the country since 1619? Is indeed African American a single culture or should one distinguish the urban culture of the North and the rural culture of the South? Are the urban cultures of Oakland, Detroit, Chicago, and New York the same culture? Are the South Bronx, Harlem, and Bedford-Stuyvesant the same New York culture? Within the South Bronx, do Christian African Americans and Muslim African Americans have the same culture? These questions are not asked flippantly. Once “culture” is taken to mean any group interest in competition with other groups, there is no logical stopping place. Given the number of characteristics cited as the basis of a culture (race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and many more), and the possible combinations thereof, there are literally thousands of cultures in the United States.

If a concern for cultural plurality is not to disintegrate into chaos, some restriction on what “culture” means seems to be warranted. When “women,” for example, are thought to be one of the players in the multicultural discussion, the issue of gender is given less attention than it deserves. As is often remarked, a group with 51 percent of the population is a strange minority. Including women with a dozen or several dozen minority cultures is not the way to face up to the relation of women and women, women and men, men and men.

Similar to the “gender issue,” several other deep divisions in the country are only obscured further by the indiscriminate use of multicultural. If “culture” were restricted in meaning to divisions in which people differ by how they speak, how they get married, what stories they tell, what they eat, how they pray and how they are buried, then the plurality of culture would look very different. For example, one of the most obvious and most important would be the division between the North and the “deep South.” More than a century and a quarter of time has not yet healed the wounds of war. However, one would have to search long in multicultural curricula for acknowledgment of this cultural division.

Overlapping the North/South division is one of the most obvious cultural differences people have: religion. From the beginning of the country, there have been intense religious differences. The nation was born of an uneasy alliance between an eighteenth-century deistic religion and a revivalistic evangelism. What held the two groups together was devotion to the religious ideal “America.” Successive waves of immigrants have raised the level of complexity in this tension. Since the ideal of “America” is biblically based, Jews and Catholics could find a home in the United States. Muslims and other religious groups face a much tougher challenge.

In 1991, New York State published a guide for multi-cultural study. In this study there is not a single sentence on religion. Culture is related to cultus or cult; religion is a primary shaper of culture. A curriculum guide that proposes to examine every culture in the country but has nothing to say about religion cannot be taken seriously. When religion is brought into the multicultural curriculum (as in California), the route is often the grand survey of “world religions.” Few teachers, let alone fifth graders, are ready for the intricate detail of these surveys. While becoming informed about all of the world’s religions would be worthwhile, the actual religious situation of the United States, past and present, remains a blank for most young people.

Almost everyone admits that the situation is messy and illogical. No one has a solution that would return us to simpler times or would produce a logical and fair society. What “responsibility” could do—an adequate grammar of responsibility—would be to open communication within people and between people. Listening to all the layers of oneself would reveal that one need not react as a member of one interest group or one “culture.” What culture is an African American woman, who is Baptist, lives on Manhattan’s East Side, and works at the United Nations? Like most people today, she is a confluence of multiple cultures. She is embedded in overlapping corporate structures that provide moral guidance. These guides can sometimes be divergent. Her response to a black issue may conflict with a feminist view. Her evangelical response may conflict with her urban openness. Her international interests may be in tension with her national citizenship.

There is nothing wrong with this woman. Indeed, the hope for the future rests on such people who are points of intersection between groups that are tempted toward separation. The rich uniqueness of her life has its problematic side in inevitable tensions and conflicts of ordinary life. That is the challenge and complexity of responsibility as the basis of moral life today. Responsibility is not a private virtue removed...
from the world of politics and business. It is a textured listening to all of the corporate structures of one’s life and then acting before a cloud of witnesses, whether visible or not.

To take responsibility for our lives is an attempt to do more than is possible. Such an attempt brings on despair among the downtrodden, hubris among the well off. To accept responsibility for the next step in our lives, based on trust in our friends and fallible knowledge of our own selves, is both possible and necessary. Every responsible action makes possible a more responsible life. Every particular act of responsibility makes credible a universal responsibility. A morality thus lived is deeply relative and therefore increasingly universal.

NOTES

Chapter One

5. Newt Gingrich, To Renew America (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 105. In direct opposition to this Republican vision, Gingrich posits the “counter-cultural left” and its all-powerful society. “In their view ‘society’ is always responsible for everything” (p. 38).