CLARE 304 / GOOD LIFE

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MORAL RELATIVISM

**Ethics and Ethos**

Ethics and ethos are historically and conceptual linked. The word “ethics” comes from the Greek word “*ethos*” which means “character” or “custom.” In fact, Plato and Aristotle first used the derivative phrase “*ta ethika*” to describe their own studies of Greek values and ideals.

*Ethos* mainly refers to that core set of attitudes, beliefs, and values that gives coherence, vitality, and identity to a community of people, an *ethnē*. In this sense, an ethos defines a way of life, the “living spirit” of a people.

*Ethics* is both the participation in and the understanding of an ethos. We participate in an ethos by our involvement with the practices, institutions, and laws that embody the core attitudes, beliefs, and values of our community, culture, or society.

We achieve an ethical understanding of our ethos by reflecting on those attitudes, beliefs, and values that shape the judgments we make, the actions we take, and the rules we follow. We thereby achieve reflective distance from the commitments of our ethos to subject them to critical scrutiny.

This relation between ethics and ethos has two implications. On the one hand, as reflective inquiry, ethics *presupposes* an ethos; that is, we reflect upon the attitudes, beliefs, and values that have already played a role in shaping our own moral outlook. On the other hand, ethics also *transcends* ethos; that is, reflection upon our attitudes, beliefs, and values can help us to clarify, justify, and even criticize aspects of the ethos we have inherited.

Ethical reflection becomes philosophical when it asks questions about the nature of morality or about our understanding of the human good. These questions arise as we reflect on the ethos of our own community, culture, or society, but they are not limited by any particular ethos.

So one of the first questions that arise for ethical reflection is whether there are any moral values that transcend the mores and customs of a particular society. Are there moral principles which express values that are objectively valid and universally applicable? Or are all judgments of right and wrong relative to some particular set of attitudes, beliefs, and values embodied in the practices, institutions, and laws of a society or culture? Is ethics bound by an ethos? In other words, is morality relative?

This question has special relevance today as we have become increasingly aware of the enormous variety of cultural attitudes, beliefs, and values. At the same time, we have become cognizant of the extent to which each culture is inclined to view its own attitudes, beliefs, and values as morally superior to those of other cultures. Our historical experience has exposed this tendency to interpret and judge other cultures through the eyes of our own cultural attitudes, beliefs, and values as the *prejudice of ethnocentrism*. It is this double realization of cultural diversity and the arrogance of ethnocentrism that give the question of moral relativism its contemporary thrust.