

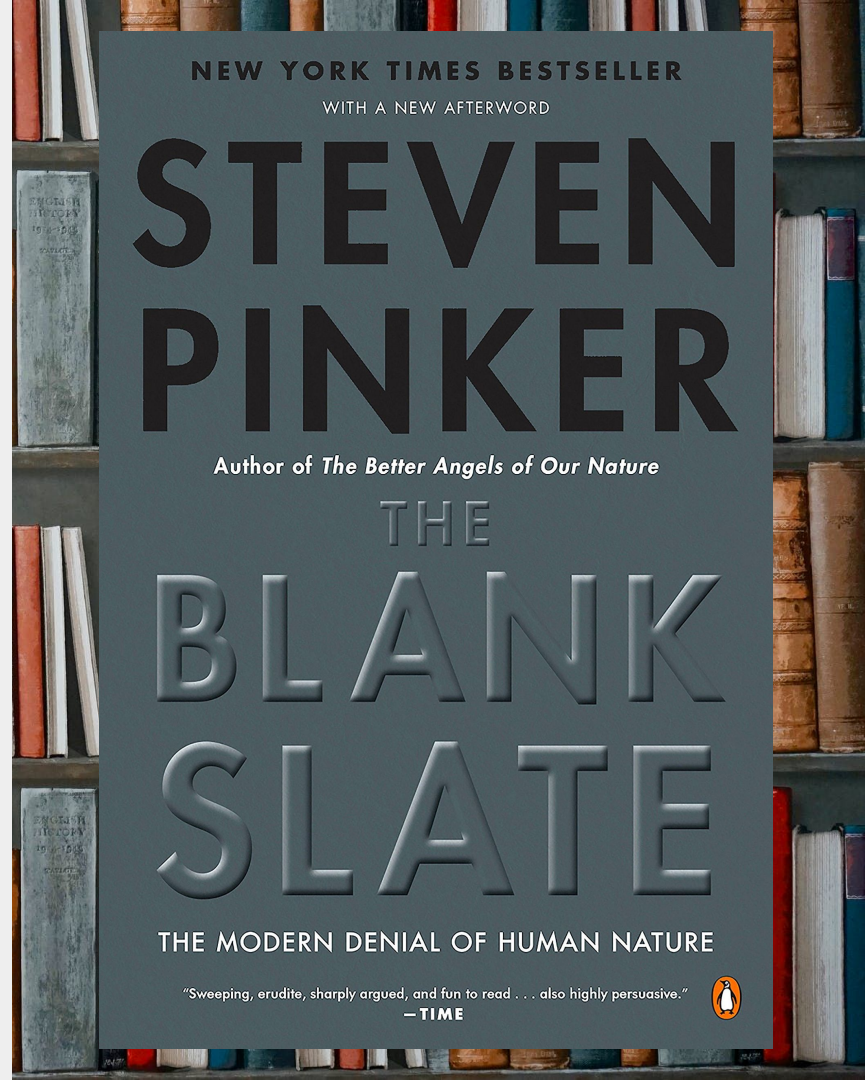


Patterns of Culture



In chapter 2 of *The Blank Slate*, Pinker explains how Boas' research led him to realize that the people of more primitive cultures were not in any way deficient. Their **languages were as complicated as ours**, allowing for complex morphology and neologisms. They were rich in meaning and could develop rapidly, as when new **numerical concepts** were constructed as soon as a society needed them. He still thought Western civilizations were superior **but** he believed that all the peoples of the world could rise to this level.

His students, however, took these ideas and turned them into moral relativism.





“The story of the rise to prominence of cultural relativism, usually attributed to the work of Franz Boas and his students...

Although Boas’s position on cultural relativism was in fact somewhat ambiguous, he laid the groundwork for the full elaboration of cultural relativism by redirecting anthropology away from evolutionary approaches... and by elaborating on Tylor’s notion that culture was an integrated system of behaviors, meanings, and psychological dispositions...”

“The flowering of classical cultural relativism awaited the work of Boas’s students, including Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Melville Herskovits. Their articulation of a comprehensive relativist doctrine was appealing to intellectuals disillusioned by the pointless brutality of World War I, which undermined faith in the West’s cultural superiority and inspired a romantic search for alternatives to materialism and industrialized warfare...”



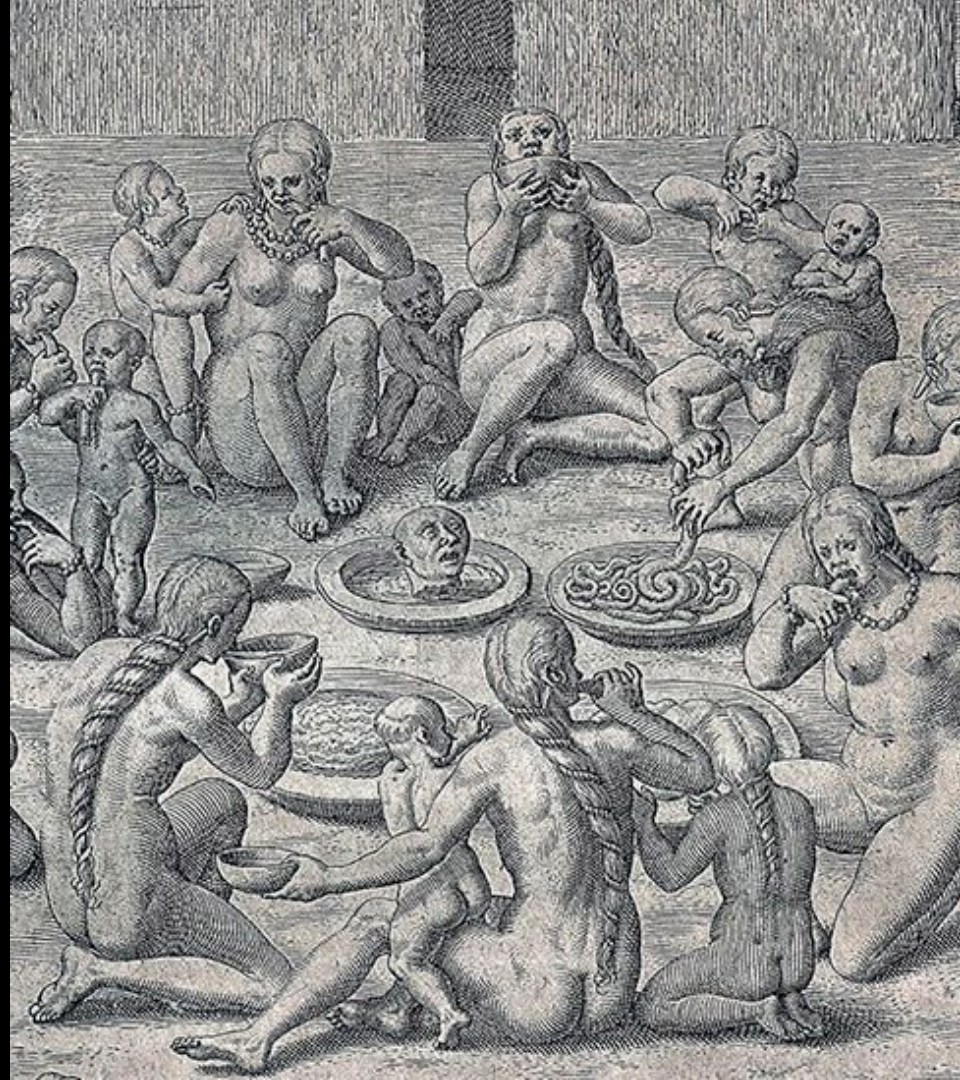


“The ethnographer must interpret a culture on the basis of its own internal web of logic rather than through the application of a universal yardstick.

This principle applies to everything from language and kinship systems to morality and ontology...”

“Complementing the core principle of cultural coherence is insistence that societies and cultures cannot be ranked on an evolutionary scale.

Each must be seen as sui generis [i.e., unique] and offering a satisfying way of life, however repugnant or outlandish particular aspects of it may seem to outsiders” ([Brown 2008: 364-5](#)).



Storytime!





Battle of Thermopylae, 480 BCE



Second Persian invasion of Greece, 480-479 BCE





Achaemenid Persian Empire, 550-330 BCE



Cyrus the Great, 600-530 BCE



The Cyrus Cylinder, created ca. 539 BCE

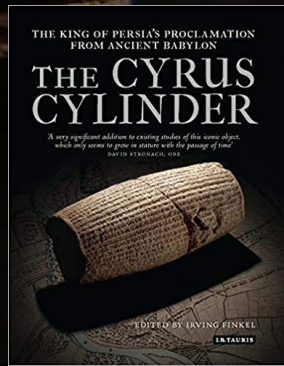
“Because of its respectful tone and the humane treatment of deportees, some have classified the Cyrus Cylinder as a ‘charter of human rights.’

‘Human rights’ is a modern term and was not in use when the cylinder was written. There is, however, evidence of some awareness that humane treatment of people according to their ‘natural rights’ was the correct way, even if the concept was never articulated.

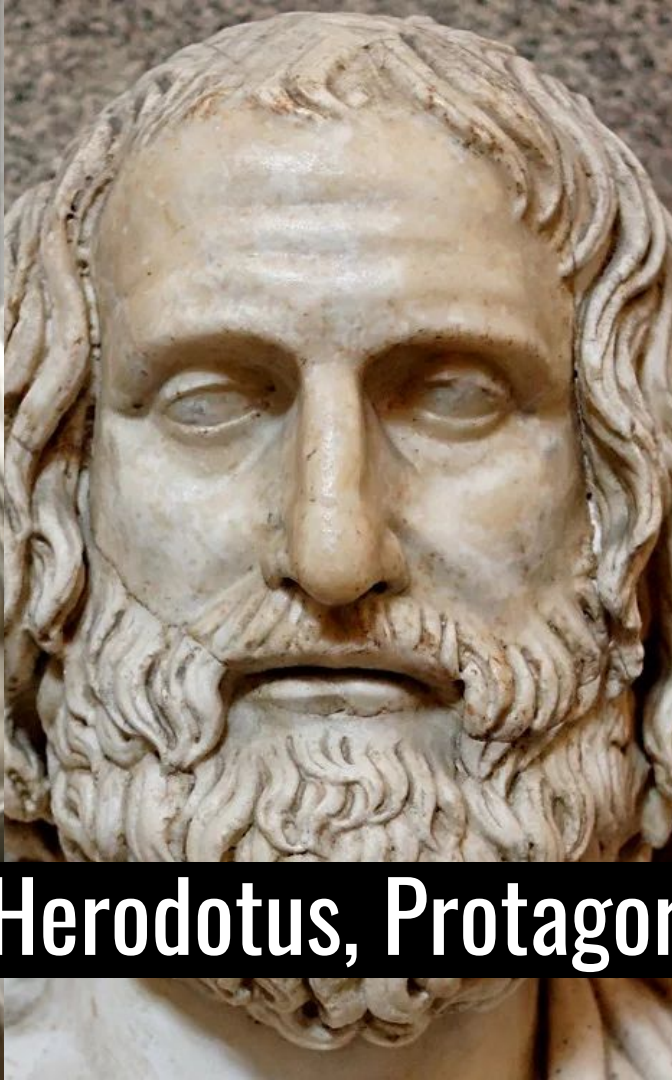
This includes avoiding violence and protecting people’s lives regardless of their nationality, respecting their freedom to worship gods of their choosing, to live in their homeland and the right ‘to dwell in peace’ — all of which today embody the natural rights of people...

“All these ideas are reflected in the text, and can be understood as part of a civilised and humane treatment of the conquered people of Babylon.

It is noteworthy how Cyrus treated the people who were not his own people and had a different culture, language and religion. Even after the conquest of Babylon, the dignity of its people was preserved”
(Finkel 2013: 122).



Also...



Herodotus, Protagoras, and Zhuangzi

Even though Cyrus' foreign policy was very charitable (to say the least), and Herodotus, Protagoras and Zhuangzi each espoused some form of relativism, classical cultural relativism wasn't really thoroughly formulated and discussed until more recently...



Cultural Relativism: Important Concepts

Cultural relativism is the view that:

- a. there is no objective way to establish that a particular morality is the correct morality;
- b. there is no reason to believe in a single true morality; even though
- c. there may be certain moral universals.



The main argument is...

There are major differences in the moralities that people accept and these differences do not seem to rest on actual differences in situation or disagreements about the facts.



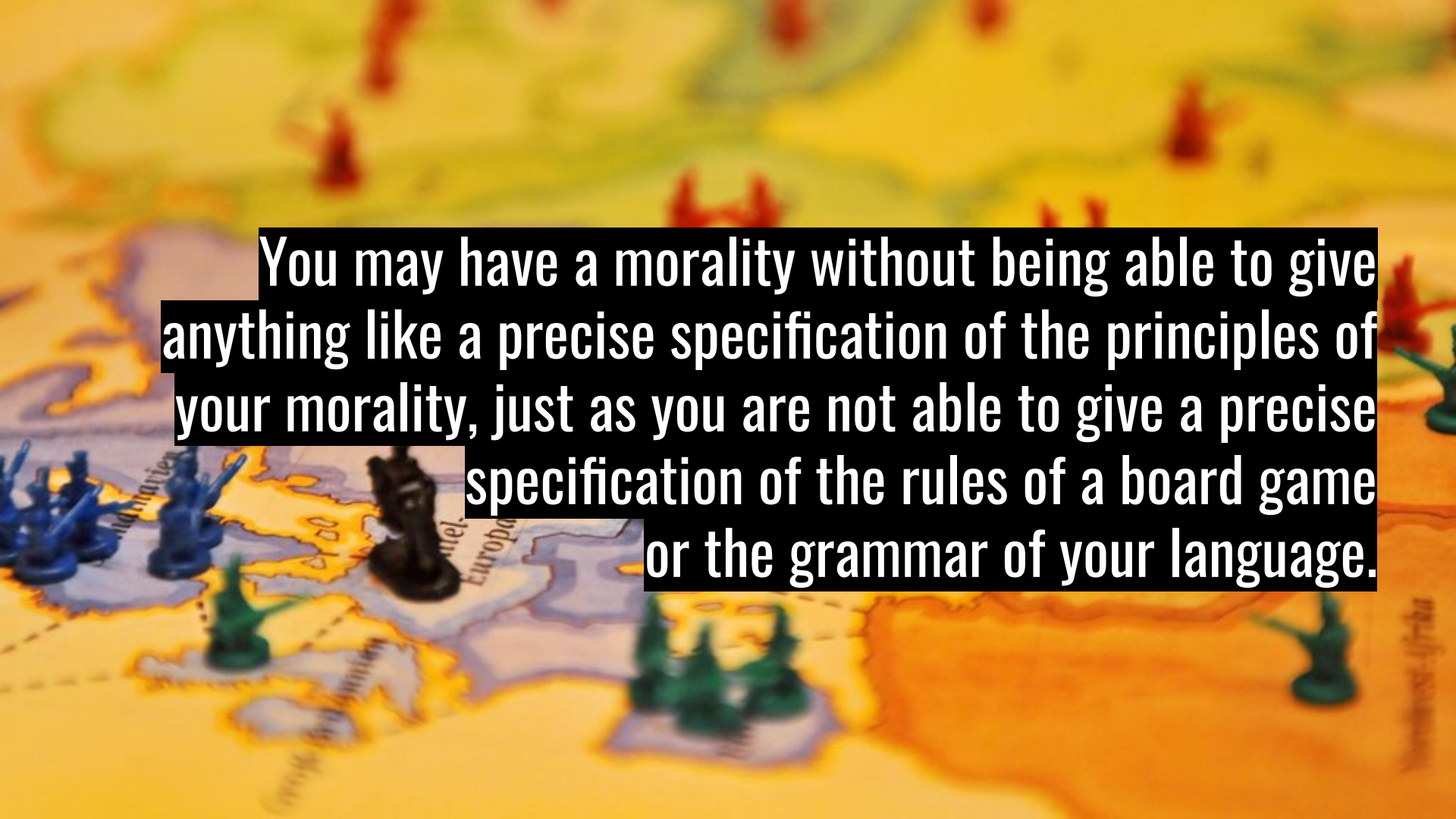
It's simply the case that there are several kinds of:

- **moral principles,**
- **requirements and permissions about what has to be done and what may be done,**
- **rankings of various things as better or worse, and**
- **specifications of morally virtuous or vicious actions and character traits, and these tend to vary widely across space and time.**



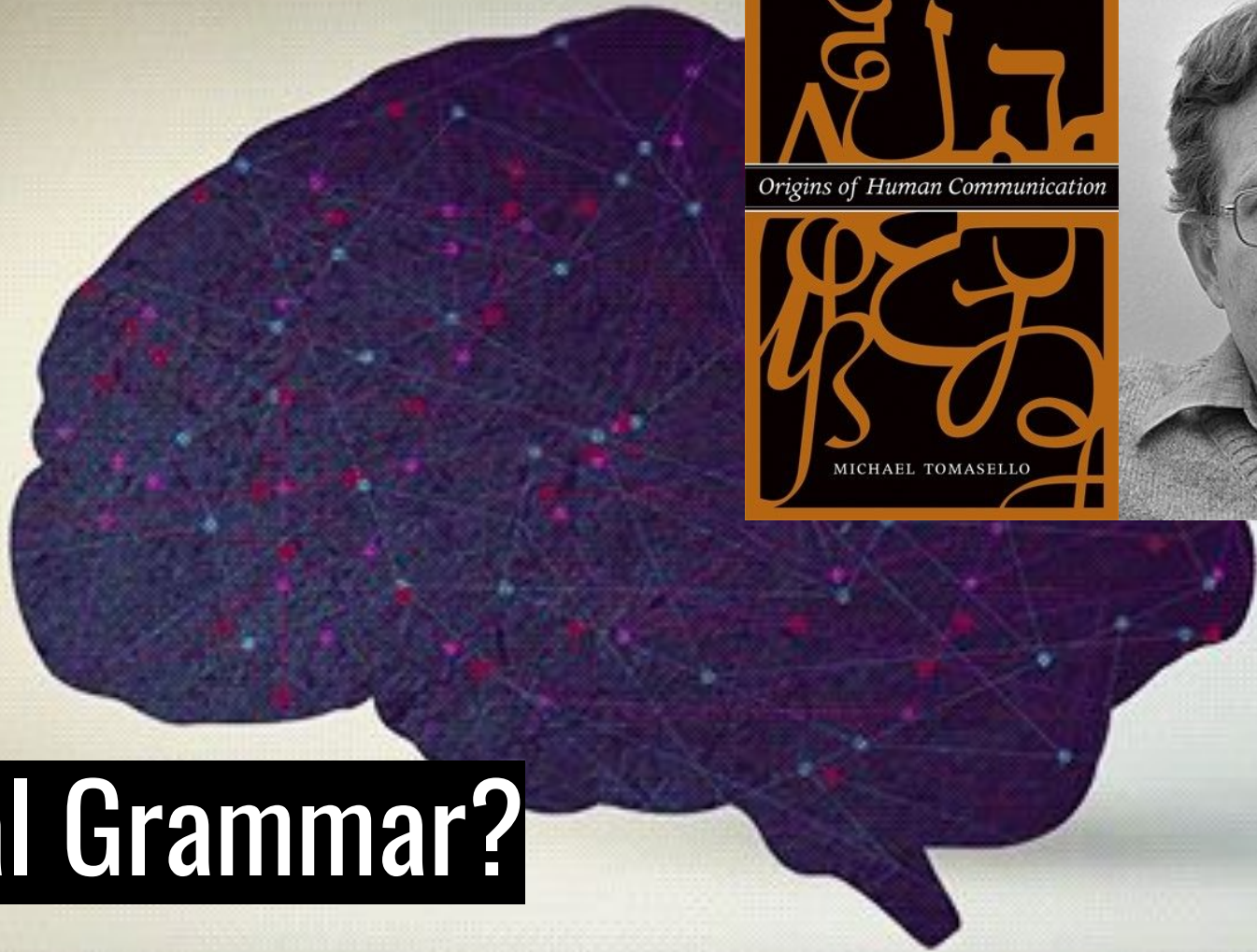


Game Analogy

A board game map with chess pieces. The map is a stylized world map with yellow and orange landmasses and blue and green oceans. Several chess pieces are placed on the map: a black king, a blue knight, a blue pawn, a green pawn, and a green knight. The text is overlaid on a black rectangular background.

You may have a morality without being able to give anything like a precise specification of the principles of your morality, just as you are not able to give a precise specification of the rules of a board game or the grammar of your language.

Moral Grammar?



Origins of Human Communication

MICHAEL TOMASELLO



Note:

Classical cultural relativists take the judgments to be true **if they are true in relation to some salient moral framework, as opposed to something like moral fictionalism, e.g., Hobbes.**

To help you understand cultural relativism (CR), here is a back and forth between an adherent and an opponent of CR...

Objections to CR

—

Objection: The Entailment Argument

The relativist claims that because different cultures have different moral codes, then there is no one universal moral code.

But just because there is disagreement about an issue, that doesn't mean there isn't an objective fact of the matter.





Response from the Cultural Relativist:

That may be true with regards to the shape of the earth, i.e. statements with an objective truth-value.

But there are somethings that have relative truth-value, e.g., our standards of beauty.

Since there is so much variance in the moral codes of cultures, that could mean that moral values are relative rather than objective.

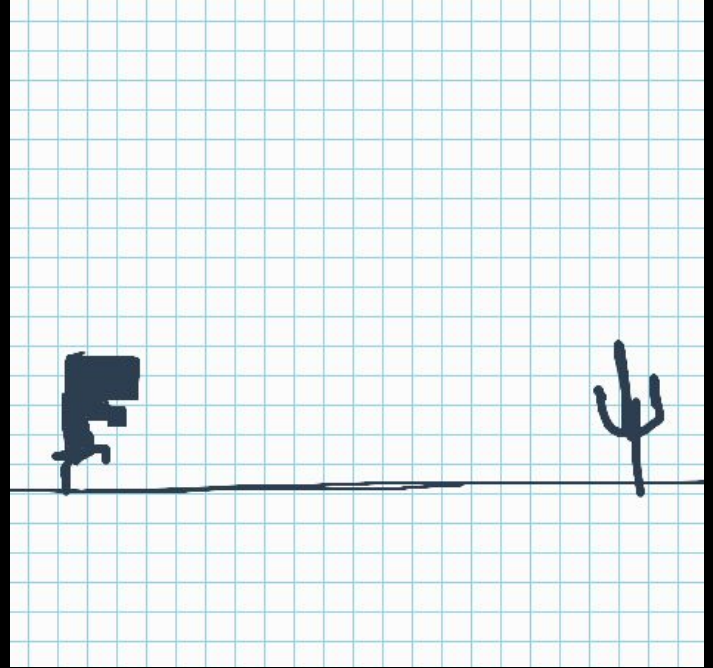
Objection: *Argument from Tolerance*

The relativist claims that we must be accepting of all moral codes. But what if a society endorses intolerance?

Must a tolerant society be tolerant of intolerance?

CR contradicts itself.

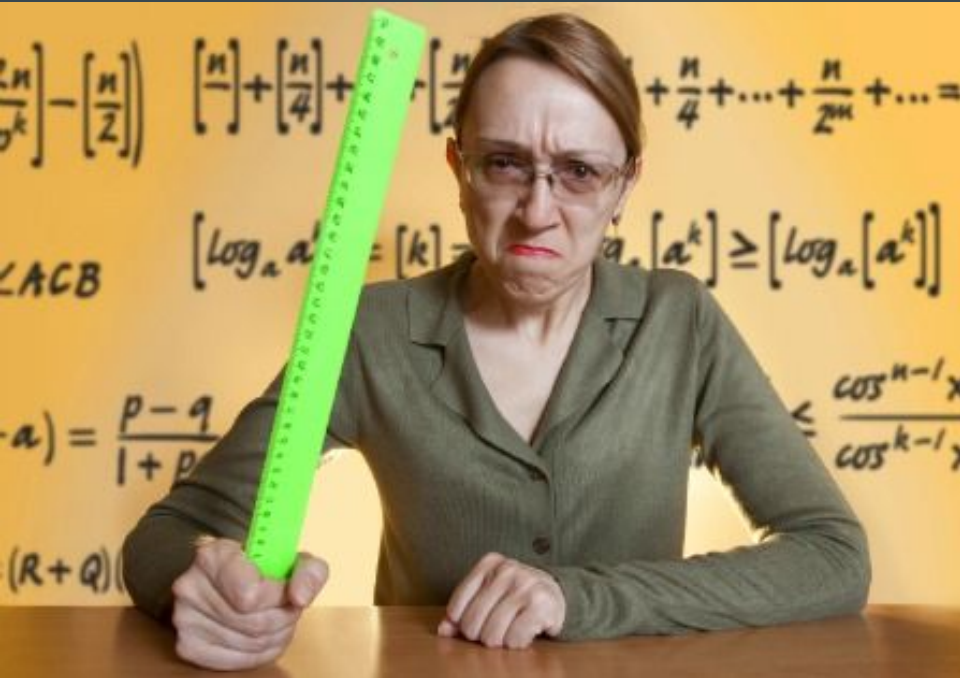
INFORMAL FALLACY OF THE DAY



Strawman Argument

A **strawman argument** is an argument in which a speaker:

- A. exaggerates the position of an opponent (making it sound unreasonable), and then
- B. refutes the exaggerated position (rather than the actual position).



Teacher:

If you want to reduce military spending, you clearly want soldiers to die.

You're obviously crazy.

Your view is false.

Response from the Cultural Relativist:

Cultural Relativism doesn't **necessarily** endorse tolerance. Rather, it claims that what is right is simply what the society has deemed to be right.

So tolerance is morally required only if you live in a tolerant society.

Objection: Chomsky's Point

Culture isn't this discrete, objectively-measurable construction.

We all construct what we call "culture" from our own, very limited interactions with our environment.

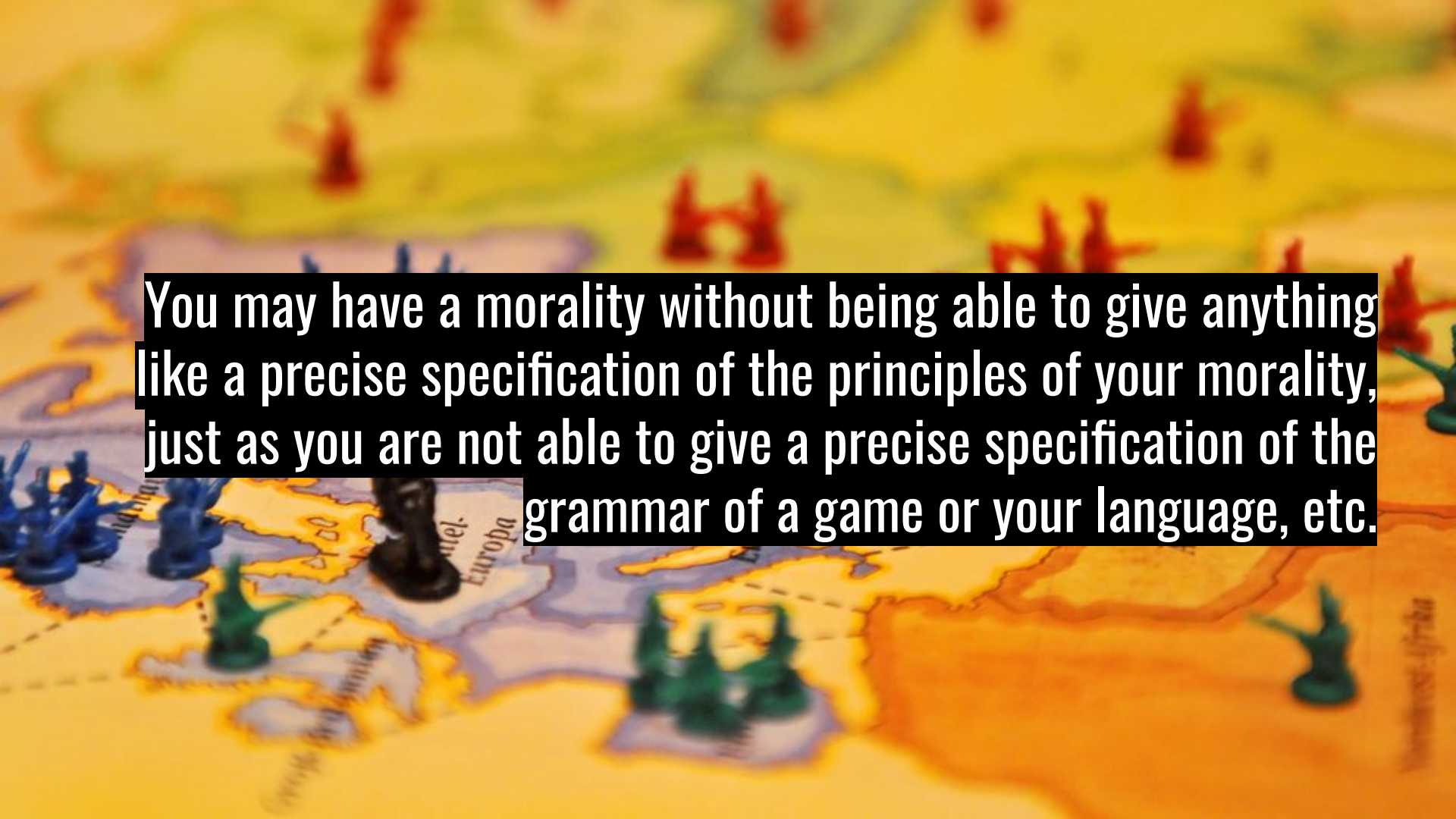
We do loosely share a culture, but it is not the sort of thing that could be defined precisely enough so that you could locate the moral values within it.

Response from the Cultural Relativist:

But we must refer back to the Game Analogy...

Many of us can play a game without explicitly being able to say all the rules, which is why it's sometimes challenging to teach games to others.

Similarly, we all intuit a moral culture, even if we can't explicitly list all its details.

A board game map of Europe is shown in the background. The map is colorful, with yellow and orange landmasses and blue and green water bodies. Several game pieces are visible: blue pieces on the left, a black piece in the center, and green pieces on the right. The word "Europa" is printed on the map. A black text box with white text is overlaid on the map.

You may have a morality without being able to give anything like a precise specification of the principles of your morality, just as you are not able to give a precise specification of the grammar of a game or your language, etc.

Note:

It is important to remember, however, that there are many different characterizations of the view, some stronger than others...

Intermission

—

Bathroom Ban of Tidong (Indonesia)



Living with the Dead (Indonesia)



Dani Amputations (Papua New Guinea)



Baby Swinging (Russians in Egypt)



Endocannibalism (Yanomami)



Baby Throwing (India)



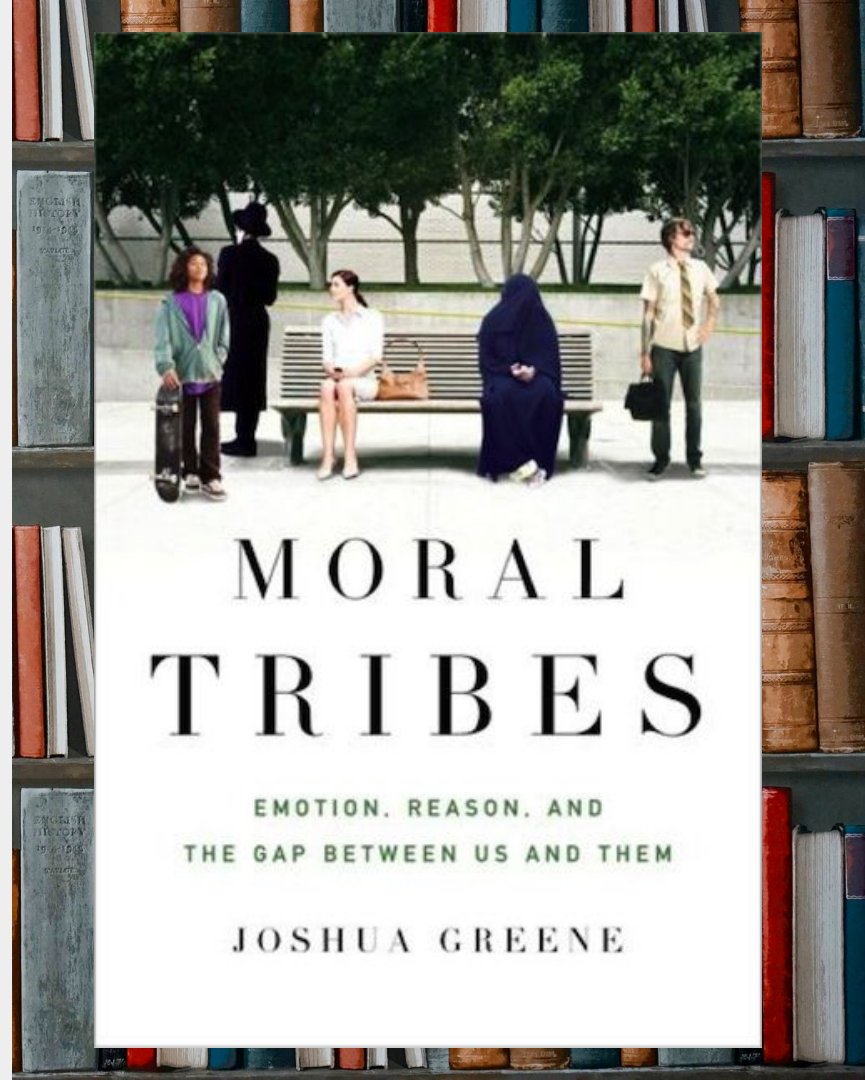
Ultimately, though, CR does not address all of our concerns...

Joshua Greene gives what he calls the meta-morality argument:

Cultural relativism answers the question of how morality works *within* a “tribe”, but it does not and cannot guide us on how morality should work *between* “tribes.”

This is, however, the most pressing problem in the 21st century.

CR fails to guide our actions, hence fails as a moral theory.



What we want from an ethical theory:

- ❑ Fit in with our moral intuitions**
- ❑ Reflect how we actually form our moral judgments**
- ❑ Resolve our moral debates**
- ❑ Solve the puzzle of human collective action**

