CHAPTER - 2
CULTURAL RELATIVISM

2.1. Introduction

It is generally believed that the academic study of culture is mainly the concern of sociologists and anthropologists. In this context, it is natural to ask what the role of philosophy in Cultural Studies is. Here it is necessary to determine the range and scope of the philosophical analysis of culture. Douglas Kellner summarizes the specific functions of philosophy in Cultural Studies thus,

i) to contemplate on the methods, presuppositions or assumptions and the metatheory of cultural studies.

ii) to articulate the values of different cultural studies and to define its concepts.

iii) to provide the normative standpoints of the critique of culture.

iv) to develop moral and aesthetic dimensions in cultural studies (139).

Anthropologists and sociologists are specifically concerned with a science of culture while philosophers are obliged to provide an ethics of Cultural Studies or an ethical study of cultures in addition to delineating the metaphysical dimensions of culture. The task of philosophy therefore is to
guide all other disciplines engaged in Cultural Studies by complementing their procedures and postulates with necessary solution to the ethical issue of judging competing cultures. Anthropology, sociology and other related sciences treat culture as a descriptive category. They describe what culture is and point out the characteristics of different cultures while philosophy focuses on the axiological aspects of Cultural Studies.

Binod Kumar Agarwala notes that the term ‘culture’ as used in anthropology and philosophy is different. In anthropology, ‘culture’ is a descriptive term that denotes ‘what is given’, but in philosophy it is a value-specific term. Agarwala further observes, “In English language there was currency only of one term ‘culture’, used indiscriminately both for value concept of culture and descriptive anthropological concept of culture” (91). He points out that in German there are the two distinct terms - Bildung for value term and Kultur for descriptive anthropological term. Agarwala criticizes that this conscious or unconscious substitution of the descriptive term ‘culture’ for the same as a value term by the Anglo-American Anthropologists who are very much interested in philosophy of culture led to the misinterpretation and the consequent confusion (91).

Keeping in mind this prescriptive sense of philosophical approach to Cultural Studies, we proceed here to discuss the two expressions of relativism pertaining to the domains of ethics and culture. This is to be
carried out with the specific intention to focus on the fact of blatant plurality in all domains of human group life including ethics and culture. This plurality is taken for granted as the basic premise of any study of relativism. If there is just one ethical code/cultural edifice, then there is no question of relativism; and as relativism forms a core theme of this study, we have to be concerned with the differential component in Cultural Studies. Moreover, we have to take into account the various ways of theorizing this differential aspect which gives rise to the concepts like cultural pluralism and multiculturalism. It is also necessary here to delineate the philosophical dimension of cultural phenomena by distinguishing clearly between the factual and the value perspective.

The term ‘culture’ is derived from the two words *cultura* and *colere* which means to inhabit, cultivate, protect and honour with worship. The plain sociological definition of culture is, ‘the way of life of a group of people’. It includes the values of a society that guide the community as regards its language, religious beliefs, traditions, intellectual and artistic achievements and such other things. Hence it will be difficult to give a single and simple definition for culture. However, Metta Spencer’s definition of culture ‘as a system of ideas, values, beliefs, knowledge and customs transmitted from generation to generation within a social group’ (54) is quite informative.
Every culture has its own ideals and values, and they vary in different cultural loci. Cultural values are regarded as the standards or norms for judging the life of each member of a social group. In addition to these values, there are certain norms which determine what is good and what is bad in collective life. Culture also includes the ethical/moral rules which are termed ‘mores’ such as the prohibition of murder, theft, rape, and the like. Such ethical norms also differ from one group to another. Group/community life not only includes the association of individuals but also the obligation of its members to live in a prescribed way in accordance with certain preset ideals and standards. Culture defines the social patterns in which each member has to perform definite functions in relation to the whole society. The phenomenon of the inevitable variety of cultures is studied from different perspectives like cultural pluralism, multiculturalism and CR. These are different perspectives of culture dealing with the same phenomenon. Hence it is necessary to bring out the differences between these approaches.

2.2. Cultural Pluralism and Multiculturalism

There are different communities which are culturally different but living together within the same society/polity. This co-presence of many different cultures and communities within a society/polity can be termed cultural pluralism that is necessarily an indication of cultural diversity. It is
necessary here to note the distinction between *cultural pluralism* and *multiculturalism*. The term ‘multiculturalism’ refers not only to the mere presence of different cultures or communities, but connotes the issue of equality also. Thus multiculturalism deals not only with the co-existence of many cultures but also with the peaceful co-existence of different cultures within the same polity or public arena. In a pluralist society, one culture naturally tends to influence or dominate other culture(s). Cultural pluralism can be defined as the mere ‘co-presence of different communities within the same polity, but multiculturalism is concerned with the question, whether these different communities co-exist equally in the public sphere’ (Mahajan 11). So the question is whether a given society provides these different cultures with equal social space in addition to the provision for co-existence and interaction.

It is widely acknowledged that multiculturalism is the position that acknowledges cultural diversity of minority cultures. A multiculturalist society includes several cultures and each culture respects other cultures. A society which accommodates different cultures may be either multiculturalist or monoculturalist. Multiculturalist society welcomes and respects the cultural space of all different communities in that society. But a monoculturalist society assimilates these communities into its mainstream culture either wholly or substantially (Parekh 6).
A society is called multiculturalist only when it recognizes various cultures in that society by granting them the same status as that of traditional culture. The minority cultures are respected in a multicultural society. So multiculturalism is not merely a matter of fact, but of norms also. The term explains how a society responds to its cultural diversity. It implies tolerant attitude/approach to different cultures in a public arena. If minority cultures sustain and share equal space with that of the traditional culture, we can call that society multiculturalist. Cultural pluralism is a descriptive term that refers to the factual condition of co-existing cultures whereas multiculturalism is a normative term that specifies the value perspective of equal respect to the coexisting cultures at par with the traditional culture.

Multiculturalism reflects the axiological concern in favor of the friction-free co-existence of different cultures, and this is the condition that necessitates relativistic approach in Cultural Studies. Thus multiculturalism is the theoretical stance that prompts us to recognize the necessity of holding a relativistic approach that understands and admires the originality, self-dependence and autonomy of each one culture. Levi-Strauss points out the threat of over-communication that leads to the loss of originality of a culture. He says, “As a matter of fact, differences (between cultures) are extremely fecund. It is only through difference that progress has been made” (20). Strauss further asserts his confidence in multiculturalism to
continue as he says, “The more a civilization becomes homogenized, the more internal lines of separation become apparent; and what is gained on one level is immediately lost on another” (20). Multiculturalism therefore recognizes the co-existence of different cultures while retaining the lines of separation within.

In a review of Bikhu Parekh’s work *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political theory*, Bharat Kumar says, “It [Multiculturalism] is an existential necessity since more than one form of life must exists in order for values we consider worthwhile to be realized” (168). The problem is “How to retain identity in diversity and commonality in difference while encouraging diversity?” (Kumar 169). The matter of concern here is how and to what extent in a multicultural society we can apply the canons of CR.

A pluralist society is destined to face empirical contradictions and conflicts. We have seen that a pluralist society or a multicultural society has to accommodate more than one culture, and in such societies any one of them necessarily tends to dominate other culture(s). Each sub-unit of the given society believes that its culture is good and right and therefore superior to that of others. This self-asserted superiority of one or another cultural unit within a society prompts the creation of its ‘others’ which are treated by the former as inferior/primitive/uncivilized. Here the notion of
CR becomes relevant and significant from a philosophical/ethical point of view.

2.3. Cultural Relativism and Ethnocentrism

We are living in a multicultural world and obviously the ongoing interaction between different cultures has become necessary. It is true that these interactions are sometimes negative and sometimes positive. As regards this interaction, there are two antithetical concepts namely ethnocentrism and CR respectively. Negative type of attitude towards other cultures/ethnic groups is termed ethnocentrism and positive attitude leads to a cultural relativist approach. As a concept, CR has always been prone to debate, and it faces the allegation that by definition itself it means ‘anything goes’. Essentially CR is an attitude to the nature and role of values in different cultures. CR implies that values in terms of norms and practices in a certain culture are relative to that culture.

CR is the theoretical position developed as a reaction against ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the belief that one’s own way of life or culture is superior to that of others, and this attitude is based on the assumption that the criteria of a person’s own culture can be used as the yardstick for measuring and evaluating another culture. James R. Beebe defines, “Ethnocentrism, roughly, is judging another culture through the eyes of your own culture and not trying to see things from their
perspective” (n.pag). On the contrary, the cultural relativist insists that every culture must be understood and evaluated in terms of that culture only, which means that there are no better cultures, or worse cultures, but only different ones. It is already mentioned that multiculturalism is a concept that implies value-laden concerns like equality of cultures. Equality in (social) status confirms the right of any culture to self-determination while co-existing with other cultures. This is the point that invites relativistic approach to cultures, as we mean by using the term CR.

However, CR is very often a target of criticism from a philosophical perspective. It is pointed out by critics that if we hold every culture to be valid on its own terms or all cultures as equally valid, then it weakens the scope of a critique of cultures. The scope for change or cultural transformation becomes doubtful. A relativist’s insistence on the intrinsic value of cultures may cause freezing of cultural entities like customs, mores, beliefs, and practices without the scope for evaluation. Regarding this ethical incommensurability of cultures, Caleb Rosado observes,

… many ethicists believe that the concept of cultural relativism threatens the discipline of ethics since, if values are relative to a given culture then this must mean that there are no universal moral absolutes by which the behavior of people can be judged (n.pag).
The charge is obviously that the concept of CR weakens the scope of moral
analyzability and universalizability.

The most popular and perpetual criticism towards relativism is that if there is no absolute or ultimate code/standard of evaluation, then all conscious human efforts to achieve progress, which is essentially the movement from lower to higher, will become meaningless. In the light of this objection, it becomes necessary to explicate how far this criticism stands plausible and in what all disciplines it weakens the application of relativism.

Roy Wagner writes:

Every culture can be understood as a specific manifestation, for example, of the phenomenon of man, and because no infallible method has ever been discovered for “grading” different cultures and sorting them into their natural types, we assume that every culture, as such, is equivalent to every other one. This assumption is called “cultural relativity” (51).

Here it is made clear that every culture is unique, and there is no universal infallible method for evaluating or measuring different cultures. Accordingly, it is not possible to separate the essence of a culture from its natural form. So CR underlines the equal validity of different cultures within a given socio-political space. It implies that we cannot estimate any
one form of life as good or another as bad. One can possibly look at the values in other cultures along with his/her own cultural values, but it should not be through an evaluator’s eyes.

Here we have to see what CR does not mean rather than to say what it means because CR is one of the most misinterpreted concepts in the field of humanities and Cultural Studies. Here is a precise remark,

The principle of cultural relativity does not mean that because the members of some savage tribe are allowed to behave in a certain way that this fact gives intellectual warrant for such behavior in all groups. Cultural relativity means, on the contrary, that the appropriateness of any positive or negative custom must be evaluated with regard to how this habit fits with other group habits (Rosado n.pag).

Rosado further clarifies that ethicists fail to recognize the intra-cultural and cross-cultural aspects of relativism. CR implies that every society has its own value perspectives and codes which guide the members of that particular society to follow fixed patterns of social behaviour. More than this CR does not imply that there is no universal element that guides human conduct. Before considering what is universal about culture/morality, it will be helpful to analyze the correlation between the relativistic aspects of
culture and morality so as to explicate the points of similarity and correlation between the two.

2.4. Cultural Relativism and Ethical Relativism

Before proceeding to clarify the precise nature of CR, it is pertinent to analyze the two interconnected expressions of relativism namely the cultural and the ethical because it is quite natural to equate the two as moral entities are part and parcel of culture. Here it is important to note the two opposite positions regarding the relationship between CR and ER as we take up their comparison in terms of correlation and difference. These positions can be stated thus:

i) CR and ER are identical concepts and hence they can be used synonymously.

ii) CR and ER are not identical in spite of their necessary correlation.

At the first sight, it may appear that culture is moulded by moral principles but in fact it is not so. Culture is the broader frame of reference within which morality is to be analyzed and understood. Moral principles are to be viewed on different levels and these levels are of course cultural.

It is often confusing to ask whether culture is a subset of morality or morality is a subset of culture. No doubt, culture is a broader realm which
includes moral customs, ritual practices, food habits, rules of personal interaction etc. So morality is a subset of culture, and according to set theory it is necessary that the elements present in the subset should be present in the main set even though all the elements of the main set may or may not be present in the subset. ER can be analyzed only with reference to CR because a set is inclusive of the characteristics of its subset. Thus when we apply set theory in this context, it becomes clear that the elements of ethical domain such as the rules, norms and beliefs of moral conduct are found in culture, and hence by delineating the properties of ER we can have a clear picture of CR. This is the reason for taking ER as an analytic index of CR.

Rosado opines that CR is not the same as ER (5) because the former has a cross-cultural reference whereas the latter has an intra-cultural reference. This means that CR is relevant between different cultures and ER is relevant within a culture. This statement can be explained well with reference to the example of the social/moral rule regarding beef-eating in a multicultural society like India with different sub-cultures c₁, c₂, c₃, c₄ etc. within an inclusive culture ‘C’ (Indian society as a whole). Socio-religious rules regarding beef-eating can be taken as ‘M’, which is viewed differently by c₁, c₂, c₃ etc. Thus within ‘C’ there are different views about ‘M’. It is clear that intra-cultural relativity of moral codes within C is common. What is referred to as C here is an abstract construct that is supposed to oversee
the peaceful co-existence of subcultures. The various expressions of M in various subcultures have nothing to do with C. Each subunit of C has its own rule regarding M that precedes the emergence of C.

In a specific case of M, at the first sight, there are two options if we think in terms of the good/bad binary in conventional ethics. Thus conventional ethics maintains a bifurcation between beef-eating as good/bad. But, in fact, it is not a point-like split. For some subcultures beef-eating is a taboo. For some others it is an approved thing. This is only a matter of cultural approval/disapproval which hardly makes clear the good/bad distinction in terms of the taboo/acceptability rule. It is not that M is acceptable because it is good, but good because it is acceptable. M is approved by members of c₁, but disapproved by those of c₂ is a fact for sociologists; M is approved because it is good and disapproved because it is bad is the position established by the proponents of c₁ and c₂ respectively. The curious thing is that the acceptance of M in c₁ is good for the members of c₁ as the disapproval of it is also considered good but by members of c₂. Thus ER recognizes that either of them is good for reasons held by and within the accommodating culture/subculture, in this case c₁ and c₂. Both positions share the relativistic stance by recognizing that the good/bad distinction is relative only to the cultural unit holding the given view of M. Considering M as acceptable is good for c₁, while disapproving M is good
for c₂. Though factually the positions regarding M held by c₁ and c₂ are contradictory, both are viewed good from the perspective of both c₁ and c₂.

As we have noted earlier, culture is inclusive of moral codes but it cannot be confined to ethics. Culture is obviously inclusive of a set of established practices related to dining, dressing, worshipping, addressing and respecting others and what not. It is not at all strange that every such practice gives rise to its concomitant social moral code which serves as the device for justifying the practice in the context of the given culture. So culture and morality are to be viewed not only as concurrent but also as concomitant. This special way of both being related indicates the possibility of understanding the relative-universal elements in culture which will enable us to delineate the precise connotations of CR.

The fact that these contradictory perspectives of M are held as good by c₁ and c₂ respectively shows that conceiving good is determined by a social code that may or may not be acceptable to individual members. And social codes are culturally determined and therefore the domain of morality as a subset of culture indicates the properties of the latter. It is true that culture and morality are inseparable social phenomena. On the one hand, the moral phenomena of a particular community are moulded by its culture. In other words, culture includes and moreover determines moral principles, and on the other hand, without morality culture of a society is incomplete.
The relationship between morality and culture and hence also between the moral and the cultural is a complex one inviting persistent debates between universalists and relativists.

Hence it is relevant here to pursue the questions like what is exactly relative in ethical deliberations and to what extent universality is ascribable to them? On the basis of our observation regarding ethics-culture correlation, these elements of relativity and universality in ethics can be further extended to the domain of culture. Hence in the succeeding sections we shall try to find out what is universal and what is relative in the case of morality with reference to the rationalist position of M.N Roy and its opposite view held by David Hume.

2.4.1. Roots of Morality- M.N. Roy and David Hume

Morality, like rationality, is very often understood as an inherent trait of human beings and hence we should first of all evaluate its status as a faculty of mind. The questions pertaining to this evaluation are:

i) Is morality an inherent biological faculty or is it acquired through adaptation to conventions?

ii) Is there a brain centre that accommodates moral sense as in the case of the cognitive faculties like reasoning?
In order to answer these questions, we have to go beyond the realm of the lexicographer’s definition of morality because such definitions normally take for granted that moral faculty is associated with conventions/customs.

Rationality, at least in its higher form, is customarily regarded as the faculty unique to humans. Rationality being recognized as essential to the human species, man came to be regarded as the only rational animal as early as the Greek tradition. There is no doubt that rationality in its higher form is a species-specific trait as claimed in the statement ‘man is a rational animal’, but consensus is emerging about ascribing different forms and degrees of rationality to non-human living forms. Reasoning in its higher form involves cognition, volition and connation and this level of connected reasoning can be identified as the faculty unique to humans. But the question is how do humans possess this faculty? Is it natural or acquired? Our first hypothesis is that rationality is a natural, biological faculty improved through experience and training. Whatever training is imparted to non-human beings, it is not possible for them to be as rational as humans naturally are. Horkheimer says,

... the force that ultimately makes reasonable actions possible is the faculty of classification, inference, and deduction, no matter what the specific content—the abstract functioning of the thinking mechanism. This type of reason may be called
subjective reason. It is essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more obvious is taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory (3).

M.N. Roy, the pioneer of scientific/naturalistic rationalism, beyond doubt propounded that rationality is a natural and biological category. The origin of human rationality is located in the law-governed nature. It is not a metaphysical/ speculative/mysterious category but a natural one. He says that human rationality is neither a priori nor a divine spark. It is the ‘microcosmic echo of the macrocosm’, and hence the noblest product of biological evolution. Roy’s scientific rationalism further links morality with rationality. He argues that rationality is the biologically determined faculty that determines other faculties including the moral faculty. It is based on the scientific view of Nature as cosmos and man as the highest level of organic evolution. What we find in Roy’s rationalism is the necessary correlation between rationality and morality as the prerogative with which humans are biologically endowed. He says, “Morality must be referred back to man’s innate rationality. Only then, man can be moral, spontaneously and voluntarily…because morality is a rational function” (Roy 36).
Here, it is relevant to read David Hume’s position that our moral convictions cannot be obtained through the exercise of reason. For him, our moral convictions are derived from our passions rather than by reasoning. The ground of morality is neither a divine order nor a universal reasoning process. Conscience/intuition cannot be a static source for that cannot be understood in terms of sense experience and emotional factors. Hume argued that reason alone can never move us into action and it cannot determine our passions. Hume says, “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions” (415). Accordingly, moral convictions do not necessarily result from reason or understanding. Reason is the slave of passions, and its only function is to serve and support passions.

Unlike M. N Roy, Hume argued that moral distinctions are not ‘discovered’ by reason, but produced by our inner sentiments. Reason is always concerned with truth/falsity. According to Hume, morality is only conventional and artificial because it is not essential or natural to humans. This is contrary to Roy’s position that the essence of humanness is rationality which is the assured source of moral deliberations. According to Hume, there are no absolute moral principles or ideas, because they depend upon our feelings and emotions. They vary from individual to individual and hence moral behavior depends on situations in which it occurs. The situation which gives the feeling of pleasure we call good and that which gives the feeling of pain we call bad. Thus good and bad situations
determine the right and wrong of *actions*. This kind of fluidity in evaluating moral judgments is obvious in Hume’s position that morality is determined by passion rather than reason.

Another claim by Hume is that ‘ought-statements’ cannot be derived from ‘is-statements’. Accordingly, value judgments cannot be derived from factual statements. Naturalists hold that moral truths can be discovered by sense experience as we observe the facts of nature. But Hume argues that experiences and variety of sense give only information about the things existing and those not existing. They are judgments asserting only that something ‘is’ or ‘is not’. But moral philosophers talk about what ‘ought’ or what ‘ought not’ to be the case. Arrington observes, “Hume’s is/ought distinction is the source of the distinction many contemporary moral philosophers draw between evaluative (normative) and descriptive (factual) judgments” (242).

The question we have taken up is whether morality is a natural endowment of human being or whether it is a conventionally acquired component of human nature. For this, we have taken two paradigms of moral philosophy from M. N. Roy and David Hume. These two thinkers treated this issue of morality in two different ways. M. N. Roy argued that morality is a biological trait and man is moral only because he is (in biological terms) rational. Thus he included moral judgments in the
category of rational choices and recognized the necessary link between the
two and further that between rationality and its organic environment.

Here comes in the question whether a rational being is by necessity a
moral being or in other words whether morality is a necessary
consequence/corollary of rationality? Roy’s answer is in the affirmative and
accordingly rational being should also be a moral being. But he does not
address the question why and how a rational being happens to behave in
immoral ways as it is very often the case. Thus it is clear that Roy’s
rationalism has focused on the roots of morality rather than on its functional
aspect.

Hume argued that reasoning does not play a necessary role in the
case of morality. Moral convictions are based only upon beliefs and
passions. But we have to analyze the source of these beliefs or passions in
order to see whether they are merely the product of social conventions and
practices. It is important to note that we cannot take an absolutistic position
to say either that our passions are necessarily dependent upon instincts or
that they are purely based on conventions and customs. Copleston observes,
“Hume seems to have thought that the general sentiments of morality are
common to all men, not only in the sense that there is a certain fundamental
agreement in the operations of these feelings” (331).
It is significant to note that even though Hume argued that passions are the cause of moral sentiments, there are fundamental beliefs, which develop out of custom. They are the following:

i) Belief in the continuous and independent existence of bodies.

ii) Belief that everything which begins to be has a cause.

Copleston brings out the significance of fundamental beliefs thus: “For Hume, these fundamental beliefs (customary) condition our more specific beliefs” (292).

When we analyze Roy’s doctrine of morality in the light of Hume’s position, it is problematic in two ways. Firstly, M.N. Roy argued that rationality causally determines morality. For him, rationality is the natural and universal trait of humankind and morality is an extensional faculty of that, i.e. rationality is the causal source of morality. In Hume’s philosophy, even the concept of causality does not imply necessity of cause-effect relation as it is only the matter of psychological habit or convention. So it is clear that Hume’s position cannot basically be identical with Roy’s. Hume’s position regarding the innateness of rationality is at odds with Roy’s biological rationalism, but there is at least a tacit admission on the part of the former regarding the existence of certain fundamental beliefs that lead to a certain fundamental agreement regarding the operation of these beliefs.
Secondly, M. N. Roy’s view is open to the question why this essential natural faculty of rationality does not manifest in all moral contexts. Roy has not been explicitly concerned with this fact. Humans are often irrational in spite of having the innate power of reasoning. Anyway, this does not imply that rationality is not a natural/universal faculty of human beings as it can be traced back to the biological/genetic makeup of Homo sapiens. Though antithetical at the first sight, the recognition of an essential (Roy) or a customary (Hume) basis of a general agreement on the possibility and necessity of distinguishing morally right/wrong points to the human prerogative to think, choose and act morally. What is left to see is whether this innate capacity for choosing/acting morally guarantees one and the same expression in different individuals in different contexts.

2.4.2. Moral Reasoning - The Neuro-ethical Position

The preceding analysis of moral faculty makes it necessary to distinguish moral reasoning from moral judgment/choice because moral judgments are the manifestations or expressions of moral reasoning. There is no guarantee that what one recognizes (rationally) as morally right/wrong would lead to its concomitant moral action. There are persons who do not do certain things in spite of knowing that they are right (good) and there are persons who do certain things in spite of knowing that they are wrong (bad). So moral reasoning need not (always) lead to morally right choice of
action. Hence it is obvious that moral judgments and actions are not always in necessary conformity with moral reasoning. This leads us to the conclusion that what is innate is moral reasoning, and what is morally right/wrong as also the individual’s choice in this matter is not determined innately but by factors other than and beyond the biological faculty. To explain in terms of mathematical vocabulary, the faculty is a constant whereas the norms and choices (of morality) are variable.

The faculty is biologically determined and possesses evolutionary significance as part of the motivational equipment that accelerates the survival potential of human species. The variable (moral) expressions of this faculty are determined culturally and hence the norms/rules/customs of deciding the right/wrong of a choice/judgment/action are different in different cultural units. Here it becomes necessary to analyze the one central issue taken up by experts working in the field of moral cognitive neuroscience - “How does the human moral mind emerge from the interaction of biological and cultural factors?” (Moll et.al. 799). Hence we have to distinguish between the faculty of moral reasoning and its expressions.

There is no doubt that morality as a faculty is universal to humankind. In this sense, we can accept Roy’s contention that morality is essentially a natural/biological trait. The degree and range of moral
reasoning may vary from person to person, but the faculty is very much there even though it does not always manifest in the same fashion. Here Hume’s contention that moral behaviour depends on situations is true and relevant. This variation in the manifestation of morality does not imply the non-existence of an innate moral rationality. Here the question is if morality is a natural/biological category, is it like hunger and sex impulse? It is true that such instincts have their metabolic bio-chemical bases. But what is the case of morality? Are there any bio-chemical changes that occur when we engage in moral discourse and choice? The analysis takes us to the new area of study namely neuroethics\textsuperscript{1}, which we hope will lead us to some sure position regarding the (biological) innateness of moral faculty.

The questions we pursue in the domain of neuroethics are of the following type:

i) Is there any brain code for our ethical judgments and principles?

ii) Whether the metaphysical ethical postulates of evil, self etc have any answer in the brain?

Intuitionists like G.E Moore argue that everyone can understand the question ‘is this good?’ because when he thinks of it, his state of mind is different from what it would be when he asks ‘is this pleasant?’ (Hudson 71). This shows that preceding moral judgment there is a unique
state of mind that characterizes the act of moral thinking. The question is if corresponding to this change in the state of mind is there a change in the neural fabric of the subject? It is at this point that the present day ethical theorists become obliged to pay attention to the ongoing developments in the area of neuroethics.

Even though time is not ripe to make final conclusions on this matter, we can certainly share the confidence of the experts in this emerging area of neuroscience that takes into account the need to solve one of the persistent controversies in philosophical ethics, i.e. ‘Is morality innate or acquired?’ This is evident from the following remark by Moll and companions: “How does moral cognition relate to emotion and motivation, and what are their neural substrates? Although moral cognitive neuroscience is still in its infancy, the available evidence already points to some promising solutions” (799).

The neuroscientific studies which are coming up show that it is not possible to rule out the neural basis of social (moral) cognition and behaviour. Yet, it does not obliterate the scope and relevance of ER since every human being while being born with the innate faculty to distinguish between virtues and vices is also born into a culture that has already embodied in it the collective expectations and prescriptions into an ethics of its own that is different from the ethical package of every other culture.
Here it becomes clear that what is biologically universal in the human species is not antithetical to the relativistic dimension of ethical behaviour in human beings that becomes expressed in a distinct cultural milieu. A clearer and deeper understanding of human brain mechanism will help us at least to clarify some of the core issues in ethics. This prompts us to consider the prospects of discovering the neural bases of morality. The empirical/experimental studies in the field of neuroethics are just assuming progress, yet the preliminary findings point to the chances of discovering and delineating the genetic bases of human morality.

The preceding discussion has enabled us to recognize the universal in ethics as the biological faculty for distinguishing the right from the wrong, but it is necessary here to avoid the possibility of confusing between the species universality of the neural substrates of moral reasoning from the traditional ethicists’ pursuit of universal norms and values that are supposed to define human morality. Hence we shall attempt to expose the precise sense of the universal in traditional ethics with reference to its counterpart in logic.

2.5. The Universal in Ethics and Logic

Metaethics is committed to discover one or another universal principle that governs ethical judgments/choices/actions. Thus we have at our disposal hedonism based on pleasure principle, divine theory based on
god’s approval/disapproval, pragmatism based on practicality or workability as the criterion of deciding the morally good/bad. All the theories of morality are in fact bound to discover the universal element that determines human morality, and it is presupposed by all of them that moral judgments are causally reducible to some motivation/law (inner) or authority/government (outer). Hence our traditional division of ethical theories into deontological/consequentialist ignores one important complementarity between them, that is the recognition of one or another element that determines moral behavior irrespective of individual/place/time. Instances are many in theoretical ethics such as the categorical imperative (Kant) or the pleasure principle (Bentham and J.S. Mill).

Peter Singer blames moral philosophers who concentrate on the discussion of metaethical issues by saying that ‘they were not actually taking part in ethics, but were engaged in a higher-level study about ethics’ (2). He argues that moral philosophers need not lay emphasis on normative ethics which is the study of general theories about what is good/bad and right/wrong. That is why ethics has remained a domain, for long, primarily focused on theoretical debates. (Ethical) applications were evaluated with reference to one or another theory. Moreover, ethical theorists favored one or another theoretical position such as hedonism or divine theory, and the respective position has been strengthened by attacking and rejecting all other (rival) theories.
So the problem can be analyzed down to the meaning of the term ‘universality’; whether it is in logic or in ethics, the term has been given a value that it did not actually deserve or possess. It is believed that the primary function of ethics is to discover universal values or moral principles and hence the discipline is rich with various theories of morality. As the sub-divisions of philosophy, the interconnectedness between ethics, metaphysics and aesthetics is obvious. In philosophical systems, ethical principles are influenced and inspired by metaphysical principles and vice versa. Philosophy in its hay days had been dominated by metaphysical concern and it has been shared conventionally by other areas of philosophy including ethics that follows suit in the pursuit of universal categories.

The problem of universals is central to metaphysical debate in which the term ‘universal’ is used in a number of different ways. Universals do not exist in space/time, but they are conceptually real or concrete. In a dictionary of philosophy, K. Srinivas and V. K. Sastry define ‘universal’ thus,

Any universal is an abstract general idea which is apprehended by mind rather than by sense- experience. Mind forms abstract general ideas by abstracting certain essential features from many other features. Thus the reality of
universal is independent of any exemplification in space and time (385).

Since the time of Plato, the universality of moral properties and mathematical entities has been a serious concern for philosophers. Henceforth idealism became quite fashionable in ethical deliberations by encouraging the view that though there is no perfect instance of good, justice, or anything in the empirical realm, they exist in the realm of universals.

In the case of ethics, the whole issue has been twisted by keeping focus on universal ‘values’ instead of a universal faculty for moral deliberations. This we have already shown with reference to Roy’s emphasis on the biological basis of moral reasoning. The question should have been - is there a common mental faculty based on a definite genetic makeup that enables humans to think and decide morally? But the question being asked is - are there universal moral values? Here the misleading presupposition is that values can exist (objectively) without the partaking moral agents, and such a presupposition is necessarily liable to be exposed to all the serious critical questions raised against Plato’s objective idealism. The question is - Is the domain of ethics analogous to Plato’s ‘heaven of reality’? in which certain universal values exist unaffected by
spatio-temporally determined empirical factors/conditions generated within a culture?

The study of logic that followed the line of the Aristotelian tradition, in spite of its development into symbolic logic, continued with the presupposition that truth value is the inherent property of elementary proposition\(^3\). The celebrated truth table method widely used for analyzing arguments is in fact based upon their ‘either T or F’ bifurcation justified in terms of the Law of Excluded Middle. This popularity of two-value logic as propositional logic is not accepted by one and all doing logic. The systematic tradition of many-valued logic began with the writings of Jan Lukasiewicz and Eurl Post in the 1920s. In the case of ‘future contingents’\(^4\), we cannot value them as either true or false at the time of utterance because they have an intermediate truth-value called ‘the possible’.

Here our concern is not to show the importance of many-valued logic but to show how the absoluteness of the principle of bivalence in logic itself is not absolute. In western epistemic circles, there has been the tendency to apply the principle of bivalence in every domain including ethics. We know that it is not fair to judge whether moral propositions are true or false because there are moral judgments which are neither true nor false or good/bad, but differently valued from different perspectives in different contexts.
The philosophy classrooms, in which the preliminaries of the discipline are introduced, echo with the dualisms of such as right/wrong, good/bad, true/false, beautiful/ugly and so on. Our concern here is to scan the notion of binaries in ethics and logic which are not only analogical but also co-born as they spring from the characteristic tendency of the occidental mindset in philosophy that splits reality with a sharp single line that passes through all the domains that examine and explain reality. This inclination to binary fission is indeed the manifestation of the modernist epistemological schism between the subject and the object or the perceiver and the perceived. The preceding observation regarding the challenge that tri-valued logic raises against the undisputed universality of T/F schism is further applicable to the ethicist’s binary of good/evil.

We have already noticed the persistent tendency to confuse the inherent faculty with its expressions in judgments and actions. The universality which is restricted to the human species is taken as categorical universality. Taking the paradigm of mathematical reasoning, we can say that computing ability is an inherent faculty, but errors in result may occur even though in mathematics the norms for measuring the truth of the results of calculations is more concrete, sharp and precise than in ethical judgments. There is no one to one correlation between morality/immorality of a choice/action and the faculty of moral reasoning as the former is determined by factors that lie outside and other than the latter. Here comes
the locus and context of culture which prescribes the right/wrong and good/bad in human actions. There is nothing universal about the expression or estimation of an act as morally right/wrong because it is culturally determined and no one culture is identical with another. But the faculty and the innate tendency for making right/wrong distinction is universal. Yet this is not universality in an absolutistic sense, but only in the qualified sense of species universality.

2.6. The Universal and the Relative in Culture

From the preceding extended discussion on the nature of the relativistic domain in ethics, we have to proceed into the analysis of CR in order to delineate the following:

i) What is the scope of applying the characteristics of ER to CR?

ii) Is there anything that is universal in the formation of culture, and if such a component is present then how is it compatible with the relativistic domain of culture?

Our observation on ER can be extended to CR in two ways-

i) by analyzing their correlation in terms of analogy, and if analogical reasoning is not logically strong enough to prove it, then
ii) analyzing their correlation on the basis of set theory to show how the ethical domain can be related to cultural domain as a subset of the latter.

Analogically viewed, ethical entities are related to cultural entities in terms of analyzable similarity as both represent domains of social interaction and regulation. Moreover, both jointly define the structure and characteristics of collective co-existence. Hence the characteristics of ethics are analogous to those of culture. Both these realms of collective life are rooted in the biological substrates that play a formative role in socialization process. But the moral/cultural expressions are not static like the faculty giving rise to them. This has been explained in terms of the constant-variable dialectics. So it is clear that both ethics and culture share the characteristic feature of being generated by an inherent potential but manifesting variously in various situations and contexts.

This sharing of characteristics has been substantiated further on the basis of set theory. It is already proved that moral entities form a subset of culture, and according to the theory, the characteristics of a subset are necessarily found in the superset. Hence, the constant-variable dialectical correlation and the complementarity between ethics and culture is substantiated by virtue of the former being a subset of the latter. Studies in neuroscience also confirm this hypothesis regarding the innateness of the
tendency for creating culture. Neuroscientists have observed that mirror neurons⁶ - the neurons in the frontal lobes of brain - play a significant role in generating the sense of self-awareness and empathy for others. These mirror neurons also play a role in learning through imitation. With this capacity, human beings inherit culture from generation to generation. In Ramachandran’s view, “once the mirror neuron system became sophisticated enough, this remarkable ability- imitation and mimesis- liberated humans from the constraints of a strictly gene-based evolution, allowing them to make a rapid transition to Lamarckian evolution” (126).

This remark points to the newly emerging hypothesis that recognizes the existence of certain neural bases of both moral and cultural expressions.

It is clear that both culture and morality spring from the same root namely the urge for sociability which is a higher level expression of the basic biological instinct to live together for improving survival chances. Moreover, these two are created with the same purpose namely the harmonious regulation of collective life. Hence morality involves the collective consent of all in a given cultural group to adopt certain ways of life and to avoid certain other ways. So morality is related to culture in a unique way. Culture is a broader term incorporating belief systems, ritual patterns, art forms, food habits and the like, and ethics is just one among these components, but it is more prominent and often the determining one.
Economic, geographic, and social background plays a significant role in the development of moral codes/standards of a particular society which are not merely the opinions of different persons. Their acceptance or non-acceptance is context-dependent, and this element of contextuality is termed cultural. None normally argues that slavery is right, but such inhuman practices are not rare in any society. There are some who argue in favour of slavery even though it is widely considered as inhuman and unjust. It does not mean that just because they are followed by a society as a customary practice they are morally right. Many of our negative (in the sense that they are not good for at least a section of individuals in that community) social practices are not approved morally but they exist in some way depending upon the political and social conditions and requirements. So the customs and values that regulate social conduct are not decided with reference to universal standards but in terms of cultural convenience.

If a certain practice/custom turns out to be unjust and harmful to a certain individual/s that too in order to serve the selfish interests of a person or a group/class, then it can be declared immoral. There may be differences of opinion in terms of the minutest details regarding the given ethical issue, but any one may apply ample moral reasoning to decide the right/wrong of the given practice. This can be demonstrated with reference to the social practice of Sati. In the Indian tradition, for a long period, Sati had been
accepted as a morally right practice, but gradually it was eradicated from
the society as immoral. W. T Stace writes: “…burning widows alive was
right for Hindus until the British stepped in and compelled the Hindus to
behave *immorally* [Italics added] by allowing their widows to remain
alive” (185). Sati demonstrates the utmost (romantic) commitment of a
traditional Hindu wife to live and die with her spouse. But common sense
ethical reasoning is sufficient to show the ‘inhuman’ element in dragging a
woman to death with no necessity except a ritualistic fancy. And it is further
deporable as we notice that what is dictated obligatory for the female is not
so in the case of the male.

If cultural diversity is a fact, then plurality of moral percepts is also a
fact. Universalists hold that morality is governed by some universal
principles which are valid in and for all cultures and hence moral values are
essentially universal. This conflict between universalism and relativism in
ethics and Cultural Studies is visibly because of the tendency to
misunderstand the distinction between the faculty and expressions of moral
reasoning. We have earlier stated the hypothesis that the biological faculty
of morality is essential to humans and in that sense it is universal, but moral
judgments are different in different conditions of existence and choice.

The evaluative categories like good/bad or right/wrong and true/false
are inapplicable to culture. When we analyze the ethical potential of CR, it
is clear that tolerance and readiness to listen to and understand other cultures is characteristic of CR. If commensuration is meant for asserting and justifying the glory of the measuring group then it is unethical, because it is driven by selfish power motive. Relativism poses incommensurability as an ethical issue. Measuring or evaluation should not be the license to inferiorize and dominate others. Hence, “Cultural relativism is the idea that cultures are to be assessed, not by any external standard, but only in relation to their own implicit or explicit aims” (Grant 207).

CR does not imply absolute incommensurability of cultures because its emphasis is on the autonomous privilege of each culture to judge and evaluate its own (moral) conventions with respect to either the survival potential or their strength in comparison with similar conventions in other cultures. Anyway, what matters is not the evaluation of one culture by another but the self-evaluation and the autonomous right to that on the part of any given culture. This self-evaluation requires a kind of transcendence, but this is not transcendence in the absolutistic sense of moving beyond empirical instances into theoretical frameworks/ideal paradigms, but choosing evaluative paradigms at will, either on the individual or on the community level. It is relevant here to note Rosaldo’s remark, “But the core notions of cultural relativism are the urgency of studying and learning from other cultures and the belief that because somebody has a different form of life, they’re not deranged, or evil” (n.pag).
CR does not mean that a culture is a closed system that refuses to be judged or valued, but this judgment is not a matter of one culture judging ‘the other’, but a culture judging itself. It is not supposed to find fault with one’s traditions and customs but to discover and prescribe the means to change for better, and every practice is ever open to revision through trial and error method. At the first sight, the aforementioned concept of cultural self-analysis looks plain and simple, but simplicity is not a disqualification. It helps to maintain cultural autonomy and at the same time to keep it open for change and improvement. Change is not to be imposed from outside, but proposed and realized from inside. This prescription may be ‘logically’ problematic, but it is the problem of bi-valued perception of reason that causes our confused understanding of absolutism versus relativism question. Here CR is to be understood in contrast with cultural imperialism, which is to be discussed in the section 3.2.2 of this work.

2.7. Summary of the Study

As different disciplines consider different dimensions of culture, philosophical intervention becomes necessary to ensure the integration and synthesis of such distinct approaches and findings. In order to analyze the exact meaning of CR, we have analyzed CR in comparison with cultural pluralism and multiculturalism. Cultural pluralism is a factual phenomenon whereas multiculturalism is concerned with value perspectives. Cultural
pluralism implies the differences between cultures and this fact invites the ethical question of equality and obviously this leads to the issue of the evaluation and comparison of cultures. The question of evaluation and comparison implies its corollary obligation to declare our position regarding the uniqueness of every culture. Thus we have concluded that multiculturalism necessitates the notion of CR in Cultural Studies.

CR implies the rejection of the notion that a certain culture is absolute, but accepts and values the differences in/of cultures. We have noted that CR is an ethical attitude of tolerance towards cultures. Then we have analyzed whether CR and ER are synonymous concepts or not. In order to analyze this, we have studied the correlation between morality and culture and it is concluded that they are inseparable social phenomena. Thus morality is a subset of culture and so the properties of ethics serve as the fingerpost to the characteristics of culture, and hence ER to those of CR.

We have noted that moral faculty is biological and in that sense it is universal, but the expressions of this moral faculty are relative to time and place. These characteristics of morality are applicable to culture also. As in the case of ethical sense, culture also has its roots in the biological basis of human sociability.

As regards the prospects of cultural change, it has been noted that cultural transcendence within the community is welcome. It does not
suggest the evaluation of other cultures with reference to a given culture that initiates evaluation. Hence evaluation means self-evaluation by self-choice.

NOTES

1. Neuroethics is the emerging area of study which focuses on the ethical, legal and social implications and that arise from application of neuroscience, knowledge and technology into medical practice and health and social policy.

2. The forms belong to a realm of abstract entities which are separable from concrete particulars in space and time.

3. Elementary propositions are all independent of each other. The truth value of a proposition is determined by the truth value of elementary propositions.

4. Future contingents are contingent statement about the future. Truth or falsity of a future contingent statement cannot be determined.

5. This socio-cultural manifestation of the epistemic dualism has been discussed in this work in detail under ‘postmodern relativism’.

6. A mirror neuron is a neuron which fires both when an animal performs an action and when the animal observes the same action
performed by another animal. These neurons have been observed in primates, including humans, and in some birds. In humans, they have been found in Broca's area and the inferior parietal cortex of the brain. For more details see Giacomo Rizzolatti and Maddalena Fabbri Destro “Mirror Neurons”

www.scholarpedia.org/article/Mirror_Neurons

“Do Mirror Neurons give us Empathy?”- Interview between V. S. Ramachandran and Jason Marsh.

http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/do_mirror_neurons_give_empathy

7. Horkeimer had referred to the case of O’Conor and FitzHugh. See his Eclipse of Reason- p.17.

8. Sati (widow self-immolation) was a social funeral practice among some traditional Indian communities. It is the practice of self-immolation of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre.