

In Defense of Ethnocentrism: An Examination of Female Genital Mutilation

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In a remote Senegalese village, a six-year-old girl lies on a mat on the ground. She thrashes in fear of what is to come but is restrained as several women hold her down. Another, the eldest in the group, wields a scalpel and, without administering any anesthesia, spreads the girl's legs to begin her task. First, she cuts away the girl's clitoris and surrounding tissue. She then removes the labia minora. Finally, ignoring the girl's screams, she cuts off the child's labia majora—most of the outside vaginal lips—and sews the open skin together. To seal the wounds and prevent them from reopening, the eldest woman binds the girl's legs together. This, however, is only the initial phase of what the little girl will face throughout the rest of her life. After proper "healing," her vaginal opening, surrounded by scar tissue, will be reduced to a hole no wider than a pencil, causing frequent urinary tract infections and blockages. Upon first intercourse, the opening will either be stretched or re-cut to accommodate her husband. If the hole is not further enlarged before childbirth, labor will be risky for both her and her child. The baby will face an increased risk of brain damage or head trauma; the mother will face an increased risk of death. Her vaginal opening will be stitched shut again after childbirth for her husband's sake. Assuming she has four children, this procedure of opening and re-stitching the wound will take place four times.¹

I am ethnocentric. The same can be argued for anyone else. If society exposes me to only one set of moral values and customs in my life and development, those of another society will inherently seem alien, if not utterly wrong. Like viewing the world from behind a pair of tinted glasses, much of how we view life can be credited to our unique perceptions. These perceptions can be shaped by such uncontrollable factors as sex, race, and the society we are born into. But while one can remove a pair of glasses with ease, stripping all bias from perception is nearly impossible. In most cases this bias is inhibitive—intolerance has negative consequences on both the viewers and those around them. However, under the most extreme circumstances, tolerance should only be stretched so far. Consider the example of female circumcision, referenced above. (It should be noted that there are different severities of the practice. The least drastic involves removing the skin covering the clitoris, similar to a male circumcision. The most common, a clitoridectomy, involves the removal of part or all of the clitoris and

¹ Introductory information on procedures and aftereffects from Jeffery P. Bishop, "Modern Liberalism, Female Circumcision, and the Rationality of Traditions," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 2004 29: 475-477.

labia minora. But I will be focusing on the practice of infibulation, as described in the introduction.)² The elderly woman in the introductory paragraph performing the rite might try to justify it, while, regardless of circumstance, I would condemn it. Being a teenage girl living in a liberated society—individually, sexually, and otherwise—I cannot and will not accept the practice as anything but barbaric and wrong. Does this equal ethnocentrism? Quite possibly. But ethnocentrism in a case this extreme might not be a bad thing. Whether looked at through the Principle of Ascent or even from a relativist perspective, I can find no justification for infibulation, more commonly referred to in the west as female genital mutilation (FGM). The only way to look at the issue, it seems, is ethnocentrically.

Perhaps, then, what would normally be perceived as ethnocentric flaws can actually be beneficial in coming to an understanding about morality in general. “I do not think our practice of justifying our beliefs needs justification,” writes philosopher Richard Rorty, a rare condoner of ethnocentrism.³ “Ethnocentrism” could merely be the first stage in defining and recognizing the makeup of our own moral values and the universality of morals in general. After all, it isn’t the agreements surrounding, but, rather, the deviations from commonly held principles that tell us where we stand. A communist in America is viewed very differently from a communist in China, due to the normative political and economic structures of each country. This is not to say that either capitalism or communism is necessarily “correct,” but that in American culture, a communist will stick out more than the millions of people shopping at Wal-Mart.

² Bishop, 475-476.

³ Richard Rorty, quoted in Robert B. Brandom, ed., *Rorty and His Critics* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000): 12.

Similarly, exposure to the issue of female circumcision—a commonly scorned ritual by our society’s standards—will serve to remind us of the morals we hold most important.

Justification for FGM and Counterarguments: Aesthetics, Gender Roles, and Tradition

In societies practicing FGM, there is often an aesthetic preference for infibulated females. Going beyond mere partiality, female anatomy in its natural state is considered ugly, and uncircumcised women are usually deemed unmarriageable similar to the way that women with unbound feet were once ridiculed in China.⁴

Admittedly, from an outside perspective, Western society could be guilty of placing equally barbaric aesthetic standards on women. While other cultures might prefer robust, curvy body shapes, our society often encourages dangerous states of thinness. “The ideal body type today,” writes Jean Kilbourne, referring to the emaciated shape, “is unattainable by most women, even if they starve themselves. Only the thinnest 5% of women in a normal weight distribution approximate this ideal, which excludes 95% of American women.”⁵ In addition to starvation, women might feel pressured to wear uncomfortable clothing or may even undergo surgical procedures like breast augmentations. An important thing to remember, though, is that women can reverse these methods. Uncomfortable clothing can be exchanged for moderate attire, starving women can be rehabilitated and gain weight, and even breast implants can be surgically removed. But to mutilate the anatomical source of what makes a woman truly female is

⁴ Bishop., 477.

⁵ Jean Kilbourne, *Still Killing Us Softly: Advertising and the Obsession with Thinness*, quoted in P. Falon, M.A. Katzman, & S.C. Wooley, eds., *Feminist Perspectives on Eating Disorders*, New York: The Guildford Press, 396.

not only medically dangerous, but also irreversible. On the subject of female circumcision, especially including infibulation, medical ethics lecturer Jeffrey P. Bishop proclaims, “[f]rom a purely medical perspective, these procedures cannot be justified.”⁶ It is also vital to recognize the role societal coercion plays in FGM. Even though our culture might idealize one version of beauty over another, and a woman might feel pressured to be thin or have large breasts, no one will ever physically force her onto an operating table to undergo augmentation. Moreover, in the United States these surgical procedures are performed under highly sanitary conditions, and patients are made aware of potential consequences to their health. FGM, on the other hand, has no such criteria to meet.

While painful or dangerous rituals exist in many societies, there are usually accompanied by reasonable justifications. Walking on hot coals is a voluntary test of spirituality, for example, and tribal tattoos display one’s cultural history. Yet female genital mutilation, though traditional, offers no such value. Instead, most justifications revolve around the idea that depriving a woman of sexual pleasure will prevent promiscuity, in turn ensuring virginity until marriage.⁷ (The word “marriage” here is practically a euphemism—in most FGM-practicing societies, a girl is sold to her husband by her parents.) A girl who is not clearly a virgin—bluntly, a girl who has not been infibulated—will almost certainly never get married. Many parents agree to circumcise their daughters to protect the investment they make in childrearing. Alternately, parents, regardless of whether they disagree with the practice itself, might force their daughters to

⁶ Bishop, 475.

⁷ Sirkku Kristiina Hellsten, “Pluralism in Multicultural Liberal Democracy and the Justification of Female Circumcision,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (1999): 70-71.

undergo female circumcision because of societal beliefs that it is the only way their girls can live good lives.

Scrutinizing Under Kellenberger’s “Principle of Ascent”

Applying political philosopher J. Kellenberger’s “Principle of Ascent,” we might try to understand female circumcision in an understandable moral light. As Kellenberger asserts, using the Principle of Ascent, a controversial matter can be comprehended through a matter of “steps.” Each step grows more and more abstract until we can find underlying morals and principles in others’ actions that mirror our own. While this “wide-angle lens” approach is valuable, however, an issue viewed too abstractly risks losing meaning.⁸

At the most basic level, a little girl undergoes infibulation according to her parents’ wishes. Her genitals are mutilated and sewn shut, causing a lifetime of pain and a permanent lack of sexual sensation. The objective description alone is enough to make one’s skin crawl; by almost any moral standards, this act is in itself wrong. We must, therefore, take another step. At the second step of the Principle of Ascent, we understand that by circumcising their children, parents increase their daughters’ odds of marrying. Going up another step, marriage is considered essential for a woman in such male-dominated societies. But why? At the most abstract level at which FGM can be viewed without losing all perspective, female circumcision leads to desirability and, ultimately, marriage. While marriage is prized in most cultures, life goes on without it. While the unmarried woman is far from the most envied in a female circumcision-practicing

⁸ J. Kellenberger, *Moral Relativism, Moral Diversity, & Human Relationships* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001): ch. 3.

society—for a married woman almost always enjoys a higher social status— she still exists. In this respect, marriage is admittedly important, but its positive aspects should not outweigh personal liberties to the extent that marriage’s value overrides the physical and mental well-being of the innocent. How could this value possibly be interpreted in a way that would permit a lifetime’s affliction of pain and suppression on an innocent young girl?

Hiding Under the Name of Relativism

For politeness’ sake, we try not to meddle in our neighbors’ affairs unless absolutely necessary. Even on a global level, efforts are made to prevent any one nation from “policing” another. Moral relativism (the belief that there is no universally accepted meaning of truth and, therefore, there can be no justifiable universal morality) can be considered similarly. Because relativists don’t believe in a universal moral code, they don’t believe in anyone’s right to impose his or her beliefs upon anyone else—at least not in the guise of upholding the code. But, even if relativists are correct in asserting that there is no clearly-defined moral law, I believe in the existence of a universal *conscience*. I might define murder differently than someone else, but we both agree that murder is wrong. We share these core values regardless of individual interpretation and act on them accordingly. Relativists may call it coincidence, but there is no other explanation for the existence of so many overlapping moral values. Stealing is wrong. Incest is wrong. Inflicting pain upon the innocent is wrong. Considering female circumcision “valid” in the light of moral relativism is like walking past a man being mugged at knifepoint under the assumption that the thief might need the money to feed his family.

No matter how righteous our intent, interfering with the cultural practice of FGM is, admittedly, a diplomatic embarrassment. Fortunately, history shows that no matter how embarrassing, such interventions are indeed possible. States political theorist Chandran Kukathas argues, “[g]roups are constantly forming and dissolving in response to political and institutional circumstances.”⁹ Our own Department of State currently supports African grassroots campaigns working towards the eradication of FGM.¹⁰ In a similar manner, American women helped bring an end to Chinese footbinding with the establishment of the Shanghai “Natural Foot Society,” whose members pledged to abstain from the debilitating practice. A single generation later, public opinion opposed footbinding, and control of the Natural Foot Society was transferred to Chinese women from its American creators.¹¹ While establishing and supporting such groups is a start, perhaps the United States could also engage in strategic “economic maneuvering” to end female genital mutilation. Cutting back on relief funding to areas that practice infibulation and, instead, allocating money to human rights groups would begin to establish the boundaries between what is and is not morally acceptable behavior in this arena. As long as these nations accept relief from the United States, it should be the right of the U.S. to step in where human rights are grossly violated. Certainly, stepping in to end flagrant human rights violations is a controversial matter when it may mean trivializing group rights. However, even if policing cultural practices is in itself wrong, I would rather err on the side of human decency.

⁹ Chandran Kukathas, “Are There Any Cultural Rights?” *Political Theory* vol. 20, no. 1 (1992), 110.

¹⁰ Gerry Mackie, “Ending Footbinding and Infibulation: A Cultural Account” *American Sociological Review* vol. 61, no. 6 (1996): 999.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 1001.

In modern, liberated Western society, a prevalent, relativistic “everything is equally acceptable” mindset now exists. After all, the term “politically correct” has never carried so much weight. Bias is considered a source of shame, while recognizing and accepting bias proves even more shameful. To even suggest that practicing female circumcision is as justified as abstaining from it is ludicrous. I find female genital mutilation to be deplorable; it is worse to look the other way in the name of relativism than to stand against this wrong, as countless girls around the world are stripped of their physical well-being and dignity.