

Some Myths About Ethnocentrism

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Abstract: Ethnocentrism, it is said, involves believing certain things to be true: that one's culture is superior to others, more deserving of respect, or at the "center" of things. On the alternative view defended in this article, ethnocentrism is a type of bias, not a set of beliefs. If this is correct, it challenges conventional wisdom about the scope, danger, and avoidance of ethnocentrism.

As she was returning to the village, she saw a strange something out in the water not far from shore. At first she thought it was a whale. When she came nearer, she saw two spruce trees standing upright on it.

"It's not a whale," she said to herself, "it's a monster."

When she came near the strange thing that lay at the edge of the water, she saw that its outside was covered with copper and that ropes were tied to the spruce trees. Then a bear came out of the strange thing and stood on it. It looked like a bear, but the face was the face of a human being.

- "The First Ship Seen by the Clatsop", an old Chinook story reported by Franz Boas, in *Chinook Texts* [1894: 277-278].

1. INTRODUCTION

Allegations of ethnocentrism are common enough. And so are corresponding anxieties. We know that our beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions are heavily subject to cultural influence, sometimes with disastrous results. We know that the allegation may well stick, in our own case – that there is some risk of guilt.

But what is it for something or someone to be "ethnocentric"? Here, understanding is harder to come by. This leaves us at a loss. *Am* I, in fact, ethnocentric? Is there really anything *wrong* with this? If so, how can I *avoid* it? In each case, the answer depends on *what* ethnocentrism is.

A leading suggestion in the literature – one famously put forward by William Graham Sumner, an early American sociologist – is that ethnocentrism is a matter of holding certain beliefs or attitudes: that one's culture is at the "center" of things, superior to others, and more deserving of respect.

This article offers a different suggestion. On the view defended here, ethnocentrism has less to do with *what* one believes than *how* one comes to believe it.

The article proceeds in three main steps. First, it exposes some weaknesses in Sumner's classic account (Sections 2 and 3). Second, it outlines, defends, and illustrates the mentioned alternative view (Sections 4 and 5). And third, it explores the implications of this alternative view (Sections 6, 7, and 8).

2. SUMNER'S ACCOUNT

In his 1906 study of "folkways" (that is: social customs or habits) Sumner offers the

following account of the phenomenon in question:

Ethnocentrism is the technical name for this view of things according to which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled with reference to it... Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn.¹

One of the advantages of starting with Sumner's account is its richness. There is a lot bundled into it, all of which sounds plausible at first glance. Even in this short quotation, at least three distinct elements come into view:

- (A) Placing one's group at the *center* of everything.
- (B) Judging one's group to be *superior* to others.
- (C) Holding outsiders in *contempt*.

According to some interpreters, (A) should be understood as a metaphor for (B); that is, to think of one's group as "central," in Sumner's view, *just is* to think of it as superior.² But that interpretation is not inevitable. For one, the metaphor may well stand for something else. Perhaps it is about making judgments from a local "point of view" – in the way that, say, a political representative does when she evaluates legislation by considering its impact on her constituents. Or perhaps there is no metaphor here at all. After all, some groups do quite literally take themselves to be at the center of things: New Yorkers, for example.³

We might also wonder whether (C) is a necessary part of (B). But this, too, need not follow. Surely it is possible to consider one's group to be superior to others, along some dimension – average life expectancy, for example – *without* holding outsiders in contempt. Equally, (B) need not follow from (C); Jim may dislike outsiders without taking his own group to be superior in any way. Hatred is sometimes born in envy.

(A), (B), and (C) all stand out as superficially plausible aspects of ethnocentrism. But (B) has gained the greatest amount of traction in the literature. According to *The Dictionary of Anthropology*, for instance, ethnocentrism *just is* "the belief that one's own culture is superior to others, which is often accompanied by a tendency to make invidious comparisons"⁴ – a view supported by various authors across the humanities and social sciences.⁵ Thus, in what immediately follows, I will focus on (B): the judgment of superiority. The question of how or whether (A) and (C) might fit into a plausible account of ethnocentrism is postponed until later.

The *type* of superiority claimed in ethnocentric judgment, on Sumner's view, can take many forms. Sumner's account invokes hierarchies of various sorts: aesthetic, religious, epistemic, and moral. Thus, ethnocentrically seeing one's group as superior can presumably involve seeing it (along with its beliefs, practices, conventions, history, and achievements) as not only more just, but more beautiful, pious, wise, true, virtuous, interesting, or useful than foreign alternatives. Insert any positive evaluative term you'd like here, really.

But while the type of "superiority" at issue in ethnocentric judgment may be open-ended, presumably the type of *group* to which superiority is ascribed is not. *Ethnocentrism* is not about exalting one's family, tribe, race, religion, nation, or even ethnicity above others, per

¹ Sumner [1906: 13].

² Merton [1996: 248].

³ See: "View of the World From 9th Avenue," cover of *The New Yorker*, March 29th, 1976.

⁴ Rhum [1997: 155].

⁵ See: Bloom [1987: 36]; Cook [1999: 8]; Kroeber [1948: 266]; Lukes [2003: 12].

se. Rather, it involves exalting one's *ethnos*: the group with which one shares (in Sumner's terminology) "folkways" or (to use the more modern term) "culture": "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."⁶

There is nothing in Sumner's account that commits it to the much-critiqued idea that "cultures" are monolithic or sharply circumscribable entities.⁷ Cultures may be fluid, contested, hybrid, and overlapping. They may transcend geographical boundaries, as is no doubt often the case in our hyper-connected world. And, in theory, cultures may be, in some sense, "imagined": that is, more a product of perception than reality. Read parsimoniously, Sumner's account describes certain subjective states – attitudes or beliefs – not objective facts.

Once we have Sumner's account in full view, however, it presents us with a puzzle. Consider the following two observations:

First, in principle, there may well be instances in which it is *justifiable* and *correct* to judge one's culture to be, in certain respect(s), superior to others.⁸ For example, some groups have higher adult literacy rates, or lower rates of infant mortality, than others. If we think these are good things – and that, more generally, societies can do either better or worse along an array of evaluative dimensions (moral, political, epistemic) – then we ought to make room for the possibility that judgments of cultural superiority can sometimes be justified and true.

Second, a belief in the superiority of some aspect(s) of one's culture may also be *rational*, in the following basic sense. If we think about what makes it rational for an individual or group *X* to adopt some belief *Y*, a standard answer is that *Y* has certain *advantages* (such as truth, plausibility, effectiveness, or good evidence) over alternatives, including any foreign alternatives. Similarly, if *X* adopts some cultural practice *Z*, it is rational for *X* to do so in light of *Z*'s perceived advantages: say, its relative utility, fairness, or overall good sense.

In other words, it looks as if a kind of meta-belief in the comparative superiority of one's beliefs and practices is not only defensible, when the evidence supports it; basic norms of rationality seem to *impel* us in this very direction.

This poses a problem for Sumner. If we think of ethnocentrism along the lines of (B) – that is, as a belief in the superiority of one's culture, along some dimension(s) – it is no longer clear why it should count as a *vice*. In ordinary discourse, ethnocentrism is a *charge* that we typically hope to avoid, if at all possible. But judgments like (B) are, on reflection, at least not manifestly reprehensible; indeed, far from it. Do we need a new account then, or is there something more that can be said on Sumner's behalf?

3. CAN SUMNER'S ACCOUNT BE SAVED?

One straightforward way to rescue Sumner's account is to reject the "ordinary" pejorative understanding of ethnocentrism, or to recommend that we revise it. This may well be the right option, but presumably we should use it only as a last resort, if it turns out that no plausible theory can vindicate common sense, which we have yet to determine.

Another option is to point out a possible inconsistency in the analysis just above. It isn't absurd to think that, in our world, some groups may well be justified in considering themselves "better" than others in *certain* limited respect(s): regarding their treatment of

⁶ This definition of culture is from Sumner's predecessor, Sir Edward Brunett Tylor [1871: 1]. Since it fits well enough with Sumner's account, and remains intuitive today, it is adopted for the purposes of this essay.

⁷ For critiques of this idea, see: Benhabib [2002]; Bahba [1996].

⁸ This article uses the terms "belief", "judgment", and "claim" interchangeably.

animals, say. But Sumner’s account can be thought to describe a more wholesale judgment: that my culture is superior to others in *all* respects. *That* kind of judgment does verge on the absurd. It is far too general to be true. For one, cultural differences are sometimes just differences in convention, for which judgments of better or worse are inappropriate. It would be odd to claim, for example, that the custom of handshaking is “superior” to that of bowing as a method of displaying courtesy or respect; once in place, both customs are, presumably, equally effective. And so, if we read (B) as a *blanket* assertion of superiority, it’s much easier to see why Sumnerian ethnocentrism would count as a mistake or a vice.

Moreover, this way of understanding the phenomenon has some external support in the literature. Alfred L. Kroeber, another early and influential American anthropologist, thought of ethnocentrism roughly along these lines: as a “tendency... to see one’s in-group as *always* right and all outgroups as wrong wherever they differ.”⁹

Read as such, ethnocentrism looks like a *vice* – or at least a false or unjustified belief – certainly in a world that is anything remotely like our own. But is this enough to rescue Sumner’s account? Do we have good reason to think of ethnocentrism as a vice of *this* sort? Here, I think Sumner’s account stands on shaky ground. And this is because ethnocentrism is best understood as a form or style of *reasoning* – not a substantive belief, or set thereof. To explain why, it is useful to leave behind the messiness of our world for a moment.

The Glory of Athens: Imagine that humanity is comprised of two small city-states, Athens and Sparta, each of which has its own unique, flourishing culture. As it happens, Athenian culture rates higher than its Spartan counterpart on every pertinent dimension of evaluation: its political system is fairer and less dysfunctional, its laws more sensible, its social structure less oppressive, its citizens more virtuous, its scientific practices more advanced. The list goes on. At an idle moment, the Athenians decide to gather together in the Assembly to discuss which culture, Spartan or Athenian, is best. And after deliberating, they conclude, rightly, that Athenian culture ranks higher in every respect.

Now, the Athenians straightforwardly qualify as ethnocentric according to the latest stipulations of Sumner’s account (B): they judge themselves cultural superiors in *all* respects. But is it right to convict the Athenians of *ethnocentrism*? Not obviously so. For one, the Athenians are in the unusual position of being correct. But that’s not all. The correctness of their judgment makes it easier to suppose that the Athenians have deliberated well in this instance – and it is *this* possibility that staves off the allegation of ethnocentrism (pending further review). To see this, consider two possible descriptions of their deliberative activities.

Scenario 1: Roused by the presence of Socrates, the Athenians tackle their question in an epistemically responsible way: deliberating extensively, open-mindedly, self-critically, rigorously, and constructively. They carefully consider every aspect of Athenian culture, consult with the Spartans about their alternative way of life (in exhaustive detail), make every possible effort to avoid any misinterpretation thereof, and transparently debate the values and norms against which both cultures are being assessed. Only after this, on the basis of a comprehensive and decisive body of evidence amassed over several years, do the Athenians conclude that their culture is, indeed, superior to its Spartan counterpart.

Described in this way, there is no ostensible reason to accuse the Athenians of ethnocentrism. What would the substance of the allegation be? After all, the reasoning behind their judgment is markedly fair, diligent, self-critical, and open-minded.

Scenario 2: However, if we alter the picture of the Athenian deliberative process, and imagine it to instead be biased or “rigged” in certain respects, all this changes. If we imagine, for instance, that the Athenian deliberations were hasty and farcical, governed by brute

⁹ Kroeber [1948: 266], my emphasis.

instinct, a shared interest in self-congratulation, profound ignorance about Spartan life (and a lack of any effort to correct for this), a fanatical trust in local authorities, or a nostalgic longing for Athenian tradition, *then* the allegation seems appropriate. It suddenly becomes natural to think of the Athenians as ethnocentric, even if their judgment, in this instance, happens to be correct.

What these observations point to is that Sumner's account errs when it makes (B) a fundamental component of ethnocentrism. In principle, it is possible to judge one's culture to be superior to foreign counterparts *without* committing any ethnocentric fault. In our world, it is true, no impartial look at the evidence could ever justify any blanket claim of cultural superiority; we are not like the imaginary Athenians. And, indeed, anyone who thinks otherwise is very likely under the influence of ethnocentric bias – that is, bias of just the sort described in the second deliberative scenario. Still, this is no reason to follow Sumner in identifying ethnocentrism with the claim of superiority itself.

Instead, a more promising option is to follow the grain of these observations, and to understand ethnocentrism as something that affects the quality and character of the belief-forming or belief-maintaining *process* – the deliberative process by which one comes to adopt or maintain some belief. Ethnocentrism seems to be a characteristically *biased* way of maintaining or arriving at beliefs, one that (in some way) prejudicially favors the beliefs, conventions, practices, and members of one's own culture, whatever and whomever they happen to be.

4. ETHNOCENTRISM AS BIAS

Biases can take at least two general forms. On the one hand, we may be *morally* biased towards certain *individuals* or *groups*. And on the other, we may be *epistemically* biased in favor of certain *judgments* or *evidence*.

Moral and epistemic biases can intersect. For instance, a moral bias can sometimes take epistemic form, since it can affect the set of cognitive judgments one is willing to consider or accept: as when we are, say, unwilling to acknowledge evidence that corroborates the criminal guilt of a loved one.

Ethnocentrism can plausibly be understood as a moral bias – that is, a way of showing special concern towards the members of one's cultural group. Elizabeth Anderson, for instance, has recently understood ethnocentrism along these lines: as “feelings of affiliation and loyalty to groups with which [one identifies]” or as “in-group favoritism.”¹⁰ And Sumner's own account of course speaks of (C) *contempt* for outsiders. But while contempt certainly can involve moral disfavor, it need not. After all, it is possible to dislike someone, or to disapprove of their behavior, while nonetheless being thoroughly concerned for their welfare.¹¹ So, we have here yet another possible aspect of ethnocentrism:

(D) Showing (unduly)¹² partial *concern* towards the members of one's cultural group.

Even if we accept (D) into our account, however, it doesn't capture the suggestion that emerged at the end of the last Section, which, on the face of it, linked ethnocentrism to an *epistemic* (rather than moral) bias.

¹⁰ Anderson [2010: 11, 19, 20, 70].

¹¹ Darwall [1977: 38-39].

¹² I add “(unduly)” only to safeguard the pejorativity of the phenomenon. If the reader finds this unnecessary, they can simply remove the addition.

Very roughly, an epistemically biased deliberative process is one that: (i) selectively avoids or fails to seek out evidence that is relevant to a question; (ii) unfairly interprets or distorts the evidence one is faced with; (iii) resists drawing the conclusion that the evidence one is faced with, in the aggregate, seems to suggest; or (iv) subjects some beliefs to unfair evidentiary standards – as when one arbitrarily subjects the beliefs of others to higher evidentiary standards than one’s own.¹³

Epistemic bias is likely restricted to instances in which failures (i) through (iv) target some specific *set* of, rather than *all*, relevant evidence or beliefs. After all, if I avoid considering *any* relevant evidence, in some judgment, we may not want to think of this as an instance of *bias* per se; it looks more like arbitrary belief. It is probably also important that the set is in some sense positioned on “one side” of an issue – as evidence that casts strictly negative light on, say, a certain political party would be – since avoiding a selective but equal measure of evidence on both sides of an issue is also not an obvious case of bias.¹⁴

What is it that makes an epistemic bias specifically *ethnocentric* then? There are, after all, innumerable ways in which (and reasons why) one might be epistemically biased. Sometimes the source of a bias is individualistic, rooted in a special personality trait: for instance, excessive personal pride may prevent one from considering the falsity of a long-held belief. Sometimes the source is vocational, as when a scientist, after years of costly research, finds it impossible to accept the ambivalence of their meticulously accumulated data. Neither of these seem like good examples of ethnocentrism.

The suggestion offered here is that ethnocentric biases reflect the pressures, limitations, and idiosyncrasies characteristic of a *cultural identity*. That was a key feature of *Scenario 2*, where various cultural interests, attachments, and limitations undermined the Athenians’ ability to responsibly consider the question before them. Thus, we can now state the core component of ethnocentrism suggested by the foregoing analysis:

(E) To be epistemically *biased* on account of cultural identity.

Where does this leave us? Just above, we considered reasons to reject the idea that ethnocentrism is a matter of (B) judging one’s culture to be superior to others. Now, (D) and (E) have emerged as plausible alternatives. But what about (A) the belief in the *centrality* of one’s culture, and (C) the attitude of *contempt* towards outsiders? Where, if at all, do these fit in?

Whether (A) forms part of a plausible account of ethnocentrism depends on how we cash out the notion of *centrality*. If we read it, again, as a proxy for (B) *superiority*, then it falls victim to the same critique. If, on the other hand, we take it as it stands, the question becomes more complex. No group, to be sure, is at the center of “everything,” as Sumner puts it. But some groups are at the center of certain things. The residents of Carnagh East are at the geographic center of Ireland. Silicon Valley is, in some meaningful sense, at the center of the internet technology industry. If we think of Silicon Valleyites as members of a distinct culture (no great stretch of the imagination),¹⁵ is it *ethnocentric* for them to believe in their industrial centrality? Not necessarily. However, if this belief is born in blind conceit on their part (also no great stretch of the imagination), unchecked by any appreciation of the vast array of tech industry activity occurring *outside* of Silicon Valley, things change: ethnocentrism is more obviously in play. But then it is at best a different, highly metaphorical

¹³ I rely here chiefly on Nickerson [1998].

¹⁴ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

¹⁵ See: “Silicon Valley” – the HBO comedy series.

type of “centrism” that is at issue – one that involves judgment on the basis of a parochial set of evidence – which is a form of (E) epistemically *biased* judgment.

Whether (C) contempt towards outsiders counts as ethnocentric is similarly dependent on interpretation. The notion that ethnocentrism involves drawing “invidious comparisons” between “us” (the virtuous) and “them” (the contemptible) is common in social science literature.¹⁶ If this means having something like (C’) a *primitive aversion* to outsiders, in the way that some have a primitive aversion to Brussels sprouts, then perhaps this is a form of ethnocentrism. But if it involves something more like (C’’) *disapproval* of outsiders, then we are back in the territory of (B) – that is, an evaluative judgment which, in principle, is subject to epistemic justification. Perhaps we sometimes ought to disapprove of, or find fault in, certain attributes of foreign cultures (even though *communicating* this disapproval might be wrong or ill-advised). Is it always *ethnocentric* to do so? Only, it seems, when bias or prejudice is involved – say, a stubborn unwillingness to recognize any virtue in foreign cultures. But this just points us back, once again, to the determinant role of (E), epistemic bias.

Taking all this into account, we are ethnocentric *if*: we (C’) are primitively averse towards cultural outsiders; (D) morally discriminate against them; or (E) are epistemically biased by our cultural background or identity. If this is correct, ethnocentrism is a multifaceted phenomenon, though not exactly in the way Sumner and others have imagined. Since the epistemological strand (E) of this alternative account is its most innovative component, plays a governing role in the preceding analysis, and is still very much in need of clarification, the remainder of the analysis will focus on it.

5. ILLUSTRATIONS

Consider the following three illustrations, or possible forms of, ethnocentric bias (E):

(I) *Biases Resulting from Limited Cultural Experience*. In the case of one kind of bias, an individual or group decides some question by appealing to their limited cultural experience, when *more* is called for.

This last qualification is important. It is not always the case that one needs to reach beyond their limited cultural experience to adequately understand some phenomenon. For instance, if I try to understand why my neighbor dresses differently on the thirty-first of October, I already have the cultural expertise I need to do this.

However, if I try to understand the meaning of totem pole iconography among the Haisla Nation, in British Columbia, or whether negotiating the price of fish in a Bamako marketplace is considered appropriate, my limited cultural experience will be inadequate. In these cases, I will need to gather new evidence – to learn new facts, perhaps even a new language, and to gather foreign cultural experience – to be a competent interpreter.¹⁷ And if this investigative work is not done, the resulting interpretation will be ethnocentric.

This kind of ethnocentric blunder – which is a failure along dimension (i) highlighted above – is best illustrated in the context of cross-cultural understanding or evaluation. There it can manifest in at least two broadly different ways.

Straightforward: In one manifestation, it involves an inadequate but straightforward appeal to one’s homegrown cultural experience in a foreign cultural context. This can generate various errors. Most typically, perhaps, it can blind us to the foreign features of an

¹⁶ See: Kinder & Kam [2008: 8]; Rhum [1997: 155].

¹⁷ This is of course a classic dictum of cultural anthropology. See: Boas [1901]; Herskovitz [1948: 79-93]; Geertz [1973: Ch. 1].

outside culture – via “projection” – as when a traveler fails to realize that a swastika encountered in Tibet is, unlike at home, most likely *not* a symbol for Nazism.¹⁸

But it can also blind us to the *value* of foreign beliefs and practices. For instance, cultural inexperience may impair or weaken my ability to see how unfamiliar practices (like the Aboriginal Australian “walkabout”) can realize familiar values (of self-reliance, spirituality, respect for nature). Or it may undermine my receptivity to certain values altogether – say, ideals of collective harmony, altruism, and self-sacrifice that are foreign to my individualistic home culture.

A culturally sheltered life experience, it is often noted, can inspire a certain overconfidence in the self-evident appeal of local mores – even local accents, foods, forms of dress, and systems of measurement. Being underexposed to alternative ways of life can make one jump to (often flattering) conclusions about their own. And these biased ascriptions of superiority or self-evidence generate new biases in turn, since they can foster a sense that one has the whole truth already – that one doesn’t even need to look beyond one’s parochial experience to make authoritative judgments about foreign beliefs and practices.¹⁹

Complex: In a second manifestation of this kind of bias, the cross-cultural application of homegrown beliefs, experiences, and knowledge is more *complex*. In particular, it is complicated by an ulterior fixation on the *exoticism* of the foreign culture in question. Thus, while someone who is ethnocentrically biased in a straightforward sense typically *under*-appreciates the distinctiveness of a foreign culture, their complex counterpart does just the opposite: they exaggerate or *over*-acknowledge its distinctiveness.²⁰

A nice example of this is what Edward Said famously describes as “orientalism”: a Western European way of imagining the Orient that unjustifiably foists exotic and unfamiliar qualities onto the latter – pre-scientific naiveté, natural servitude, unspeakable cruelty or barbarity, and an unrepressed attitude towards human desire.²¹

Importantly, these complex projections can involve imagining a foreign culture to be *superior* to the local alternative. For instance, Michel de Montaigne’s idyllic description of 16th Century native Brazilian life (an early evocation of the myth of the “noble savage”) seems less like sober ethnography than reality inversion – that is, a reverie of an innocent, almost childlike society in which the decadent corruptions of 16th Century French society are conspicuously absent.²² The flattering nature of the description is compatible with (and indeed, in this case, even suggestive of) its being ethnocentric.

(II) *Dogmatic Attachment to Culturally Received Opinion*. In another kind of case, ethnocentrism can involve treating a culturally received belief or opinion as something like a “fixed point” in one’s judgment, in any of the following senses: (i) avoiding evidence that

¹⁸ John W. Cook names misinterpretations of this sort “projection errors”, providing a number of useful examples in, Cook [1999: 93-101].

¹⁹ See: John Stuart Mill on the “magical influence of custom” in Mill [1859: 9]; and Michel de Montaigne: “We all call barbarous anything that is contrary to our own habits. Indeed we seem to have no other criterion of truth and reason than the type and kind of opinions and customs current in the land where we live. There we always see the perfect religion, the perfect political system, the perfect and most accomplished way of doing everything.” – from “On Cannibals” in de Montaigne [1580: 108-109].

²⁰ Nussbaum calls this “Romanticism” [1997: 123-130]. See also: Kinder & Kam [2009: 7-8]; and Sumner [1906: 13]: “Ethnocentrism leads a people to exaggerate and intensify everything in their own folkways which is peculiar and which differentiates them from others.”

²¹ Said [1979].

²² de Montaigne [1580: 228-241]. For a similar analysis of Montaigne’s account, see: Lukes [2008: 30-31].

might speak against it, (ii) unfairly discrediting encountered evidence that does speak against it, (iii) failing to disown the belief when that is what a thorough encounter with one’s evidence recommends, or (iv) arbitrarily subjecting contrary beliefs to higher evidentiary standards.

Examples of this type of testimonial bias are numerous and familiar. Its presence is obvious, for example, in the domain of moral-political opinion, where judgments (on matters such as the proper “size” of government, the morality of gun control, abortion, etc.) are often formed at a young age under the influence of parents, teachers, media, peers, and then rarely revised or even made available for scrutiny.²³ But it is also evident in the scientific domain. Beliefs about the truth of evolutionary theory and the role of human activity in producing climate change, for instance, are notoriously subject to cultural influence.²⁴ And, once in place, they are frequently held onto regardless of the preponderance of evidence.

There are two main sources of epistemic concern about biases of this sort. Testimony is an important means of acquiring knowledge and justified belief. However, its justifiability in any given instance standardly depends on the reliability of (or, for internalists, the rationality of relying on) the relevant testimonial source.²⁵ This is where we encounter the first source of concern, since one might reasonably doubt the expertise of one’s culture on a great number of subjects. For instance, surveys have shown that global public opinion on the role of human activity in producing climate change is strikingly at odds with the opinion of experts.²⁶ This is likely one subject, then, for which it would be epistemically imprudent to rely on socially received opinion instead of expert opinion – for instance, as published in the latest *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) report.

Nonetheless, a reliance on poor testimonial sources will not be an epistemic disaster, provided one is later willing to revise one’s beliefs in light of available evidence or expert judgment. But such flexibility is precisely what this kind of bias rules out; once the belief is acquired, it is dogmatically held onto – whether as part of an explicitly asserted identity or as a less conscious result of enculturation. This is the second source of epistemic concern, then, and it seems more serious than the first. Adopting a false or unjustified belief is epistemically undesirable; being dogmatically committed to such a belief is surely worse.²⁷

(III) *Biases That Serve Cultural Interests.* There are various ways in which one’s reasoning might be made to serve the interests of one’s cultural group. Groups may have an interest in maintaining a positive self-image (say, as blameless, praiseworthy, or enlightened) that influences their interpretation and evaluation of all manner of things. A group may feel inclined to whitewash its history by omitting its morally unsavory aspects from school textbooks. Or, it may find reassurance in turning its critical attention *outwards* rather than inwards, lambasting foreign cultural practices without criticizing problematic practices at home.²⁸

Groups may also reason in ways that serve their interest in power or dominion over others. For instance, a group interested in dominating its neighbor may be inclined to ignore evidence of the latter’s peaceable nature, preferring instead to see and portray them as

²³ See e.g., Haidt [2012].

²⁴ See e.g., Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, & Braman [2011].

²⁵ Coady [1992: 21-24].

²⁶ See: Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, & Braman [2011].

²⁷ All of this can be understood as an explanation of why uncovering the *cultural* origins of a belief – or a dogmatic attachment thereto – is something we should often worry about, epistemologically speaking. For a plausible account of why genealogical facts are *sometimes* of epistemic relevance, see: Vavova [Forthcoming].

²⁸ See: Tamir [1996].

unreasonable brutes in need of suppression. It is precisely this desire to legitimate asymmetric relations of power that motivates the stereotypes of orientalism, as Said understood it. In his analysis, the West's groundless portrayal of "Orientals" as naïve, servile, barbaric, and exotically uninhibited, and so on, was instrumental to rationalizing the Orient's colonial domination.²⁹

These interest-serving biases may well be fueled by (and fuel) underlying *moral* bias of type (D). After all, if I am radically partial to the interests of my cultural group – or even just (C') primitively averse to foreigners – then I may naturally be inclined to reason in (culturally) self-serving ways. Interest-serving biases are thus one possible point of overlap between the (C') non-cognitive, (D) moral, and (E) epistemic dimensions of ethnocentrism, which makes them particularly convincing instances of the phenomenon in general.

They also help to demonstrate just how much is at stake, and how important it can be, to avoid ethnocentrism, given the patently disastrous impact of such forms of reasoning on human life.

6. SOME FURTHER MYTHS

The preceding illustrations can explain the original appeal of Sumner's account. After all, the various epistemic biases described just above will often *tend* to produce (A)-type beliefs in "centrality" and (B)-type judgments of superiority, of the very sort described by Sumner. If the process of enculturation makes my judgment (II) dogmatically conform to that of my cultural group, then, to me, the views of the latter will naturally be (B) "the only right ones." And if my experience of the world includes (I) little significant exposure to cultures beyond my own, I may be easily lured into illusions about my group's being, say, a greater (A) "center" of learning or creativity than it is.

The difference, on the current account, is that judgments of cultural centrality and superiority no longer qualify as ethnocentric *on their own*. Their ethnocentricity depends on their genealogy and on whether (E) ethnocentric bias is a relevant part of it – on whether, for instance, due to cultural influence, one simply *presumes*, against available evidence, that their culture is superior to others. In a sense, then, Sumner's account picks out common *symptoms* of a deeper illness.³⁰ Locating ethnocentrism at this deeper level helps explain the enduring appeal of Sumner's definition, in a way that accommodates the challenging intuitions raised in Sections 2 and 3.

But some popular assumptions about ethnocentrism should not even be granted symptomatic status. Consider the following three examples:

Culturally Particular Beliefs are Ethnocentric. It is often assumed that the ethnocentricity of a judgment hinges on brute facts about its place or culture of origin. For example, some have argued that the mere (alleged) fact that human rights were originally conceived by "Westerners" is proof of their ethnocentricity.³¹ And others have argued that the best way to exonerate human rights of this charge is to point out their universal currency.³²

On the reading offered here, however, the cultural particularity or ubiquity of a belief has no direct bearing on its ethnocentricity. It is the *deliberative route* by which the belief is formed and maintained that matters. Pointing out the cultural particularity of human rights, then, does not establish their ethnocentricity – nor is their global popularity any guarantee

²⁹ Said [1979: 9-15].

³⁰ My thanks to James W. Nickel for suggesting this analogy.

³¹ An early example of this claim can be found in the American Anthropological Association's "Statement on Human Rights" [1947].

³² Renteln [1988].

that such rights are justified on epistemically responsible grounds, free of cultural bias.³³

Ethnocentrism Can be Avoided by Affirming the Equality of Cultures. It is sometimes said that ethnocentrism can be avoided if we assume that all cultures are qualitatively “equal.” Allan Bloom famously imputed this strategy to his university students.³⁴ And it is a visible strategy among theorists of human rights. For instance, Makau Mutua argues that, to avoid “eurocentrism... [p]roper human rights ought to assume that all cultures are equal.”³⁵

Once we leave Sumner’s definition behind, however, this strategy falls apart. Judgments of cultural superiority may sometimes cause offence, or even harm. It may be wrong or stupid to express them. But that does not make them ethnocentric, at least not in the epistemological sense explored here. What matters in this respect is how *well-reasoned* these judgments are, or turn out to be: whether they are responsible, fair, rigorous, and sensitive to the actual evidence. Indeed, as suggested above, one can still be recognizably ethnocentric even while believing their culture to be (in one or more ways) *equally* as good as or, like de Montaigne, *worse* than foreign alternatives.

Ethnocentric Judgment is Universal in Scope. There is a strong temptation to understand ethnocentrism as necessarily involving judgments of universal or cross-cultural scope. For instance, in his account, one that comes close to the present one, Martin Hollis understands “the charge” of ethnocentrism to consist in the following claim:

“...that the accused did unwarrantedly presume the truth of a *universal* proposition and/or its applicability to persons of contrary opinion, such presumption being of cultural origin.”³⁶

Hollis is not alone in assuming that ethnocentrism involves making a universal claim of some kind.³⁷ And in practice allegations of ethnocentrism are nearly always targeted at universalist projects and claims – human rights being, again, a prime target – which likely fuels (and is fueled by) this widespread intuition.

But there is reason to resist this assumption. A judgment can be biased and, in particular, ethnocentrically biased, even if it is non-universal in scope, or only about what “we” ought to do “around here.” For instance, a Texan considering whether capital punishment ought to be abolished *in Texas*, may fail, say, to give a fair hearing to arguments in favor of abolition because the religious subculture of which she is a member is staunchly against it – bias (II) above. If this locally-oriented judgment can be as culturally biased as any other, it is hard to see why it should not be able to count as an instance of ethnocentrism. There is no obvious reason to assume that ethnocentric judgment must be universal in scope.

This makes ethnocentrism a more pervasive phenomenon than it might otherwise seem to be. Turning our judgment *inwards*, or suspending belief about universal and cross-cultural matters, provides no guarantee of escape.

7. WHAT ABOUT CULTURAL RELATIVISM?

Ever since cultural anthropologists first popularized concerns about ethnocentrism in the early twentieth-century, it has been strongly associated with the doctrine of cultural relativism. In general, this doctrine has been used to help explain what is *wrong* with

³³ This point is made forcefully by both Tasioulas [2002: 995-1006] and Buchanan [2008: 44-45].

³⁴ Bloom [1987].

³⁵ Mutua [2002: 109-111].

³⁶ Hollis [1999: 31]. (my emphasis).

³⁷ See: Tylor [1963: 565].

ethnocentrism, more or less as Sumner understands it. The thought promoted by early anthropologists, roughly speaking, is that since (according to cultural relativism) “no technique of qualitatively evaluating cultures has been discovered,”³⁸ (B)-type assertions of cultural superiority are inevitably wrong.³⁹

This role gives the doctrine of cultural relativism an apparent emancipatory power: if only we could be brought to appreciate the truth of the doctrine, we would have the ultimate antidote to ethnocentrism, since we would understand why we should never engage in the forms of evaluation it involves.⁴⁰ Almost paradoxically, it has also fueled a sense that demonstrating the falsity or absurdity of cultural relativism in itself solves the problem of ethnocentrism, since, if cultural relativism is false, the problem does not exist in the first place.⁴¹

Once we move outside the confines of Sumner’s definition, and focus on the epistemological understanding of ethnocentrism developed here, however, there is no real need to appeal to cultural relativism to understand what might be wrong with ethnocentrism. We don’t need to be relativists, or even pluralists,⁴² to understand what is problematic about: (I) relying on limited cultural experience when some cognitive task requires more; (II) dogmatically subscribing to received opinion; or (III) reasoning in ways that serve one’s culture’s interests. Far from it. Ordinary realist presuppositions about the objective (culture-independent) nature of truth are perfectly adequate for this.

Thus, on the current view, affirming cultural relativism is not going to be an all-purpose antidote to ethnocentrism; it is hard to see how that platitudinous affirmation alone will help us meet any of the epistemic responsibilities at issue. Nor will rejecting cultural relativism make the problem disappear entirely, since it can easily be given alternative, non-relativistic foundations.

Indeed, quite the opposite: an appeal to cultural relativism may well *undermine* our ability to identify any problem in this vicinity. This becomes easier to see once we sharpen our understanding cultural relativism itself. Consider, for instance, an *assessor-based* version of cultural relativism about truth. According to such a doctrine, whether some fact holds depends on whether it is generally *believed* to hold by the culture of the assessor. This means that, for any given assessor, the truth will (in effect) always mirror the beliefs that they assimilate through the process of enculturation. If, for example, my culture rears me to believe that capital punishment is permissible, then it *will indeed be* permissible in any context I care to consider, precisely because it is believed to be so by my (the assessor’s) culture.

Since assimilating the beliefs of one’s culture is, on this view, a superb way of accessing the truth, (II) dogmatically holding on to such beliefs is unlikely to count as a bias or a problem in this instance. It will instead look more like the epistemically responsible thing to do. Ironically, it is hard to get worries about ethnocentric bias going here.

If we instead adopt an *agent-based* form of cultural relativism about truth – which is in fact closer to what early twentieth-century cultural anthropologists typically endorsed –⁴³ the problem becomes easier to explain, but there are still gaps. According to this view, the facts that hold for some agent (or set thereof) will depend on whether they are generally believed

³⁸ AAA [1947: 542].

³⁹ See: AAA [1947]; Lukes [2008: ix-xi]; and Cook: “Obviously, the term “ethnocentrism” presupposes that the relativistic account of morality is correct.” [1999: 80-81].

⁴⁰ “[Cultural relativism] gives us the leverage to lift us out of the ethnocentric morass in which our thinking about ultimate values has for so long bogged down.” Herskovitz [1972: 34].

⁴¹ See, e.g., Donnelly [2003: Ch. 6]; Griffin [2008: Ch. 7].

⁴² See: Tasioulas [2012]; Buchanan [2008].

⁴³ See: AAA [1947].

to hold by the culture of the *agent(s)* in question. So, here, a culture's established judgments (including its "moral code") have only *local* authority, since they determine the facts that hold for members of the culture in question and no one else. Facts that we are accustomed to think of as universal may now be true for "them" and false for "us."⁴⁴

In this case, enculturation is not similarly guaranteed to steer our judgment right in all instances. If my aim is to understand what is true for *other* cultures, for example, then the process of enculturation will have aligned my judgment with the wrong set of beliefs (unless these groups somehow happen to share the same set as my own). But if my aim is to apprehend *local* facts that apply within my own culture, then I am in luck: (I) a reliance only on my limited cultural experience, and/or (II) dogmatic deference to local opinion, will again seem unproblematic, since this will conveniently align my thought with the beliefs that dictate the facts in question. Anxieties about ethnocentrism's ability to corrupt our judgment *at home*, and not just abroad, are not straightforwardly available to the cultural relativist.

Moreover, if we accept an *agent-based* form of cultural relativism we may well be unable to explain why ethnocentrism is a *universal* problem, since the moral and epistemic responsibilities it contravenes may themselves only have local validity.⁴⁵ In all these ways, cultural relativism is not only unnecessary but also unhelpful to those interested in making sense of the *problem* of ethnocentrism.

8. CONCLUSION

Ethnocentrism should be understood as one epistemic hazard – or what John Rawls called "burden of judgment"⁴⁶ – among many. The analysis in this article is meant to help us refine our sense of the scope and nature of this particular hazard.

The account is designed to be acceptable from a variety of metaethical, metaphysical, and epistemological perspectives. It does not, so far as I can see, rely on anything more than a minimal description of our epistemic responsibilities: ideals of truth-seeking, open-mindedness, self-interrogation, and evidence-based inquiry. There is no rich, culturally specific model of rational judgment in operation here.⁴⁷

If the account is correct, then it can serve as a useful platform for revisiting questions about what makes ethnocentrism a dangerous force in our moral, political, and epistemic lives, and how it can be avoided.⁴⁸ However, we might first wonder whether ethnocentrism is even *avoidable*, on the present account.

The answer is not obvious. Since ethnocentrism, as it is understood here, involves shirking certain basic epistemic responsibilities, its avoidability depends, at least in part, on how stringent we take these responsibilities to be. Ethnocentrism is clearly avoidable if, for instance, we take them to boil down to something like:

(R) Doing everything *reasonably* within one's power to seek out and fairly interpret the evidence relevant to whatever question one is trying to answer.

Imagine, for instance, the following case:

⁴⁴ For a contemporary example of this kind of relativism, see: Velleman [2013: Ch. 4].

⁴⁵ See: the "anthropologist's heresy" in Williams [1972: 20-22].

⁴⁶ Rawls [1993: 54-58].

⁴⁷ Even religious epistemologies premised on the evidentiary power of divine *revelation* (as opposed to, say, popular opinion) have the tools to make sense of concerns about ethnocentrism.

⁴⁸ For some very interesting discussions, see: Fraenkel [2015]; Haidt [2012: 48, 312-313].

Uncontacted Tribe Spots an Airplane: An uncontacted tribe in the Amazon forest has no knowledge of modern technology, and no easy way of gaining such knowledge. But one day it spots a piloted airplane flying overhead. After careful and elaborate consideration, the group decides that the UFO must be a bird-like deity familiar in local mythology. Without any shared concept of “airplane,” the group struggles to imagine what else the object could be.

According to (R), in principle, the group meets its epistemic responsibilities here. After all, what more can we *reasonably* expect it to conclude? The group (plausibly) produces a justified belief that happens to be false, due to extraneous circumstances, but not because of any demonstrable *bias*. Thus, it escapes ethnocentrism in this instance.

This analysis reveals something unsatisfactory about taking ethnocentrism to necessarily involve some violation of (R), however. This is because there plainly *is* something (epistemologically) ethnocentric about the uncontacted tribe’s judgment. The group lacks the cultural resources (shared concepts and knowledge) needed to make accurate sense of the phenomenon at hand, but relies on culturally indigenous resources anyways. It commits a straightforward projection error: (I) appealing to limited cultural experience when more is called for. It is just that the group cannot really be *blamed* for doing so. In a sense, it is blamelessly ethnocentric.

What this suggests is that, at least in some instances, ethnocentrism is unavoidable; avoiding it requires meeting ideals or responsibilities that cannot actually be met. How demanding are these ideals, then?

Can only superhuman agents, with access to historically and culturally unlimited stores of information, escape ethnocentrism? This sort of thought, combined with the palpable impossibility of such access (or what he called “skyhooks”), led Richard Rorty to conclude that ethnocentrism is a permanent fixture of human consciousness: something to accept rather than avoid.⁴⁹

But there is no need to assume anything so extreme. All the example really shows is that, in *some* instances, avoiding ethnocentrism is impossible – and falling victim to it is potentially blameless. In such situations, perhaps the best we can do is *mitigate* its effects, or *preempt* them by suspending judgment. And this may often be the case. Even for those of us who try, understanding the other, and being genuinely open-minded towards their point of view, is frequently an ideal just out of reach: something we can only approximate. The human condition makes bias a stubborn companion.⁵⁰

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⁴⁹ Rorty [1991: 2, 14-15].

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