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ITETHIC

Book: Contemporary Moral Problems

Title: Chapter 1: Ethical Theories (Mary Midgley: Trying Out One's New Sword)

Internet Reference:

<http://www.amazon.com/Contemporary-Moral-Problems-James-White/dp/0534517242>

Learning Expectations:

To know what "Trying out one's new sword" means

To know what is "Moral Isolationism"

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Quote:

*"Nobody can respect what is entirely unintelligible to them. To respect someone, we have to know enough about him to make a favourable judgment, however general and tentative. And we do understand people in other cultures to this extent. Otherwise a great mass of our most valuable thinking would be paralysed."*

Book Review:

"Trying out one's new sword" by Mary Midgley focuses on "Moral Isolationism", which means that it is wrong for us to criticize any other cultures that we do not fully understand. She then tells that this is wrong because it curtails the freedom of moral reasoning. I agree on Midgley's claim because personally, I prefer to just ignore different practices of other cultures, and I believe by doing so, I respect them in a way we both can appreciate. In my opinion, *tsujigiri*, is unlawful, because it involves physically hurting a stranger, and possibly taking his life. Respecting and valuing a person's life is more important than determining the effectiveness of a sword, injuring his own honor, offend his ancestors and let down his emperor. The cruelty of this tradition says it all. I believe that a sword, or any weapon for that matter, should only be used for self-defense and nothing else. People must not abuse the capabilities of injury-inflicting tools such as these weapons. Restraining of one's self to act by using violence is a must. Many other practices from different cultures involves of harming the innocent. What we can possibly do is to raise the awareness of our society on those practices and its harmful consequences. We must do this without resorting in to hostility.

What I have learned:

I have understood that we must respect and understand thoroughly the different cultures around us.

### Integrity Questions:

1. Do we have to criticize other cultures?
2. How will we make others appreciate our own culture?

### Review Questions:

1. What is “moral isolationism”?

- According to Midgley, “moral isolationism” is: “Consists in simply denying that we can ever understand any culture except our own well enough to make judgments about it. Those who recommend this hold that the world is sharply divided into separate societies, sealed units, each with its own system of thought. They feel that the respect and tolerance due from one system to another forbids us ever to take up a critical position to any other culture. Moral judgment, they suggest, is a kind of coinage valid only in its country of origin.”

2. Explain the Japanese custom of *tsujigiri*. What questions does Midgley ask about this custom?

- *Tsujigiri*, which literally means as “crossroads-cut”, involves a process wherein a Samurai sword has to be tried out to determine if it works properly. The procedure is to slice through someone with a single blow, from the shoulder to the opposite flank. If the wielder of the Samurai sword fails, he could injure his honour, offend his ancestors, and even let down his emperor.

- Midgley asked 3 questions about this custom:

- Does the isolating barrier work both ways? Are people in other cultures equally unable to criticize *us*?
- Does the isolating barrier between cultures block praise as well as blame?
- What is involved in judging?

3. What is wrong with moral isolationism, according to Midgley?

- According to Midgley, “Moral isolationism would lay down a general ban on moral reasoning. Essentially, this is the programme of immorality, and it carries a distressing logical difficulty.”

4. What does Midgley think is the basis for criticizing other cultures?

- Midgley thinks that the basis for criticizing other cultures is to expect the person from a different culture to change his own present judgment to a truer one—namely, one that is favourable

and the standards cannot just be Samurai standards but the ones current in his or her culture. Ideals like discipline and devotion will not move anybody unless he himself accepts them.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Midgley says that Nietzsche is an immoralist. Is that an accurate and fair assessment of Nietzsche? Why or why not?

- Yes, because Nietzsche advocated master and slave morality. Morality does not have to recognize superiority and inferiority of human beings.

2. Do you agree with Midgley's claim that the idea of separate and unmixed cultures is unreal? Explain your answer.

- Yes, I agree because no one can really isolate his or her culture. Man is created to be a social being and this enables him to seek and be curious about his surroundings.