



# Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy

*Michele M. Moody-Adams*

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The persistence of deep moral disagreements--across cultures as well as within them--has created widespread skepticism about the objectivity of morality. Moral relativism, moral pessimism, and the denigration of ethics in comparison with science are the results. *Fieldwork in Familiar Places* challenges the misconceptions about morality, culture, and objectivity that support these skepticisms, to show that we can take moral disagreement seriously and yet retain our aspirations for moral objectivity.

Michele Moody-Adams critically scrutinizes the anthropological evidence commonly used to support moral relativism. Drawing on extensive knowledge of the relevant anthropological literature, she dismantles the mystical conceptions of "culture" that underwrite relativism. She demonstrates that cultures are not hermetically sealed from each other, but are rather the product of eclectic mixtures and borrowings rich with contradictions and possibilities for change. The internal complexity of cultures is not only crucial for cultural survival, but will always thwart relativist efforts to confine moral judgments to a single culture. *Fieldwork in Familiar Places* will forever change the way we think about relativism: anthropologists, psychologists, historians, and philosophers alike will be forced to reconsider many of their theoretical presuppositions.

Moody-Adams also challenges the notion that ethics is methodologically deficient because it does not meet standards set by natural science. She contends that ethics is an interpretive enterprise, not a failed naturalistic one: genuine ethical inquiry, including philosophical ethics, is a species of interpretive ethnography. We have reason for moral optimism, Moody-Adams argues. Even the most serious moral disagreements take place against a background of moral agreement, and thus genuine ethical inquiry will be fieldwork in familiar places. Philosophers can contribute to this enterprise, she believes, if they return to a Socratic conception of themselves as members of a rich and complex community of moral inquirers.



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