

*Daniel.* In one of my early books — I think it was probably *Ishmael* — I made the point that missionaries were astonished to find that the aboriginal peoples they worked among didn't know right from wrong, and I said the missionaries were quite correct in their observation. I received several indignant letters about this from people who thought I was denigrating aboriginal peoples, implying that they were somehow subhuman. Whatever the missionaries thought, *of course* these peoples knew right from wrong!

*Elaine.* I'm not sure why you say you yourself don't know right from wrong.

*Daniel.* To me — as to the aborigines being evangelized — these are quite arbitrary categories that can be switched back and forth at will. For example, you know very well that abortion was very seriously wrong before *Roe v. Wade*. After *Roe v. Wade* it became right, though naturally there are still people who think it's wrong. Which is it, right or wrong?

*Elaine.* I think a woman has the right to choose to have an abortion.

*Daniel.* You mean she has the right to do something that's wrong?

*Elaine.* No. It isn't something wrong.

*Daniel.* Are you hesitant to call it right?

*Elaine.* No.

*Daniel.* But I'm sure you're aware that tens of millions of Americans would like to see *Roe v. Wade* reversed, would like to see abortion outlawed again.

*Elaine.* Yes.

*Daniel.* And if they succeeded in having the present law overturned, would abortion then be right or wrong?

*Elaine has no answer.*

*Daniel.* If you'd like to know how wrong abortion seemed to people fifty years ago, you should see a movie called *Detective Story*, based on a very successful Broadway play by Sidney Kingsley. The action takes place in a station house, where a detective played by Kirk Douglas is interrogating one of the most loathsome criminals he's ever encountered, an abortionist. Unfortunately, his zeal leads him to a horrendous discovery — his own wife was once one of the abortionist's clients. Now he sees his wife as almost as loathsome as the abortionist himself — and this revelation all but tears him apart. This was not a picture directed toward a bigoted, minority audience. It was nominated for four Academy Awards and won one.

*Elaine still has nothing to say.*

*Daniel.* If the present law were overturned, a woman would be imprisoned for having an abortion. Yes?

*Elaine.* That's right.

*Daniel.* Would her punishment be wrongful?

*Elaine.* Not according to the law.

*Daniel.* Ah, the law! So by changing a law, something that's right today can become something that's wrong tomorrow. Isn't that so?

*Elaine.* Yes. And of course the reverse is true as well. Something that's wrong today can become something that's right tomorrow, if the law is changed.

*Daniel.* Is capital punishment right or wrong?

*Elaine.* Some people think it's right, some people think it's wrong.

*Daniel.* So, collectively, do these people know right from wrong?

*Elaine.* Not in this instance.

*Daniel.* And in the instance of abortion do people collectively know right from wrong?

*Elaine.* No.

*Daniel.* Is sex between persons of the same gender right or wrong?

*Elaine.* Again, some people think it's right and some people think it's wrong.

*Daniel.* What about assisted suicide?

*Elaine.* The same. Some say it's right and some say it's wrong.

*Daniel.* What about using animals in scientific research?

*Elaine.* The same.

*Daniel.* But these are all people who would insist that they know right from wrong, aren't they?

*Elaine.* Yes, I'd think so.

*Daniel.* But in fact, for some strange reason, they can't agree on what's right and what's wrong in these and many other cases.

*Elaine.* They agree on it in most cases, I think. For example, they all agree that murder is wrong.

*Daniel.* Murder is *defined* as wrong, Elaine. Murder is *wrongful* killing. Isn't that so?

*Elaine.* Yes.

*Daniel.* But not all killing is wrongful. Killing in self-defense isn't wrongful, and it isn't murder.

*Elaine.* True.

*Daniel.* People will also agree that theft is wrong, but again, theft is *defined* as wrong. Theft is wrongful taking. Everyone can agree that acts that are *defined* as wrongful are wrong. In other words, people know right from wrong when the law tells them which is which. But the same law is subject to change. What's right today can be wrong tomorrow and vice versa.

*Elaine.* Yes, that's true.

*Daniel.* Can you understand now why those aboriginals had a hard time grasping this distinction that was so clear to the missionaries? To the missionaries it seemed completely self-evident. To the aboriginals it seemed completely arbitrary — as it does to me.

*Elaine.* This is an example of something you described in *Beyond Civilization*. I don't remember what you called it. The cultural . . . something or other.

*Daniel.* The cultural fallacy. The belief that the ideas that come to us as the received wisdom of our culture are innate to the human mind — that they actually arise from the structure of the human mind itself. According to this particular cultural fallacy, someone who can't tell the difference between right and wrong is either retarded or insane . . . This looks like a good stopping point.