Present and explain Conventionalism. Present, explain, and evaluate the Cultural Differences Argument.

Conventionalism says that there are no objective moral truths. An objective truth would be a statement that is true independently of how people think or feel about it. For example, the claims there’s life on Mars is true or false independent of whether anyone believes it. An example of a non-objective truth would be if someone said that pudding tastes good. That might be a true statement, but it depends on his attitude toward pudding. Basically, when someone says “Pudding is good” they just mean “Pudding tastes good to me” or “I like pudding”. Conventionalism says the same thing about moral claims. When someone makes a statement of the form “X is right” he just means “His society likes or approves of X” and when someone else makes a statement of the form “X is wrong” she just means “Her society disapproves of X.” So, if I say “Infanticide is wrong” I would just be saying “My (American) society disapproves of infanticide”. Since most Americans disapprove of infanticide, what I said was true. On the other hand, if someone in an Eskimo community said “Infanticide is wrong” they would be saying “My (Eskimo) society disapproves of infanticide”. And that might be false, since the Eskimo culture used to accept infanticide. The important point is that there’s no genuine disagreement in this case, since there’s no objective fact about whether or not infanticide is ok.

One argument against objectivism was The Cultural Differences Argument. It went like this:

1. Different cultures have different beliefs about morality.
2. If (1), then there are no objective moral truths.
3. There are no objective moral truths.

The reasoning behind (1) is pretty straightforward. Anthropologists have shown that societies have totally different beliefs and practices when it comes to religion, politics, and even morality. For example, the ancient Greeks thought that it was right to burn the dead, whereas the ancient Callatians thought the dead should be eaten. (2) just says that, if you’ve got a cross-cultural differences like this, there isn’t any objective fact about who’s “right” or “wrong”. Different cultures just do things different ways.
We talked about two main objections to this argument in class. First, there is the worry that there isn’t as much disagreement over morality as it might seem. For example, the US and the UK have different traffic laws. In the US we say that you should drive on the right and in the UK they say that you should drive on the left. But BOTH laws are motivated by the same basic principle: death, injuries, and property damage are bad things. The two governments just enforce the basic moral principle in different ways. It might be the same way with the Greeks and Callatians. Everyone agrees on the basic moral principle, which is that we should honor our dead. The two cultures just obey this principle in different ways. The main point is that, to get to the conclusion that there are NO objective truths, you would have to start off with the premise that there is NO moral agreement. But understood in this way, [1] seems false. It looks like all cultures accept some of the same basic moral principles. The second objection had to do with (2) and the distinction between belief and truth. Just because two societies have different beliefs doesn’t mean that there is no objective truth. Some societies believe that the earth is spherical and some don’t, but that doesn’t mean the earth has no objective shape. Maybe it’s the same way with morality.

When we were talking about conventionalism, I just kept thinking about what my mom used to say: “Would you jump off a bridge if everyone else did?” Her point was that you shouldn’t just do something just because everyone else thinks it’s cool. But that’s basically what conventionalism is saying—the right thing to do is whatever most of the people around me approve of.