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## CULTURAL RELATIVISM

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Cultural relativism, a doctrine originating in American cultural anthropology (Tennekes 1971; Jarvie 1975), has at least two components (cp. Spiro 1986). The first component is factual: judgements about the world and judgements of value vary widely from culture to culture. The second component is philosophical: assessment of claims about the world and about morality is also culture-dependent. To put this second component differently: there are no truths or moral principles that transcend culture. The philosophical anthropology (Agassi 1977) of cultural relativism treats culture as an independent variable. Cultures are units discrete in both space and time. Custom, art, world view, and social structure are dependent variables governed by and responsive to variation in culture. Social anthropologists initially resisted this assignation of causal priority to culture, wanting instead to reserve that priority for social structure and social organisation; the later part of the twentieth century so

something of a sea-change among them in that the doctrine of cultural relativism developed quite surprising currency (though see Kuper 1999; and my review Jarvie 2000).

Cultural relativism is seen by its proponents as a benign, even obligatory, influence on anthropological theory and practice; by its critics it is seen as pernicious. In this paper cultural relativism will be described critically, that is, its claims and premisses will be subjected to close philosophical scrutiny. We will find that the doctrine cannot survive such scrutiny and so needs to be explained as itself a product of a particular (sub-)culture rather than as a scientific truth disclosed by anthropological research.

In summary, cultural relativism (1) will be shown to be a beguiling, false (2) , even incoherent (3) doctrine, that has enjoyed a prolonged vogue (4) in twentieth century anthropology and its spheres of influence. Most of its adherents believe it to be factually true and morally exemplary (5) .They are uncritical of it because of the fruitfulness of its associated method (6) , and its liberal policy implications (7) . Critics of cultural relativism are counter-attacked with charges of denying the facts of cultural diversity (8) and/or of harbouring illiberal tendencies (9) . In

truth, only by repudiating cultural relativism can anthropologists come to terms with the world and the human predicament as they really are (10) .

## 1. Definition of Cultural Relativism

Although philosophically not very satisfactory (see Bidney 1953, pp. 423-29) , the classic statement of cultural relativism is by the American anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits in 1955:

The principle of cultural relativism, briefly stated, is as follows: Judgements are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation. Those who hold for the existence of fixed values will find materials in other societies that necessitate re- investigation of their assumptions. Are there absolute moral standards, or are moral standards effective only as far as they agree with the orientations of a given people at a given period in their history? ..We even approach the problem of the ultimate nature of reality itself. ..Is reality. ..not defined and redefined by the ever-varied symbolisms of the innumerable languages of mankind? (Herskovits 1972, p. 15.)

Herskovits contrasts relativism not only with its philosophical contrary absolutism but also with an anthropological alternative, ethnocentrism:

Ethnocentrism is the point of view that one's own way of life is to be preferred to all others. (p. 21)

Herskovits claims that cultural relativism puts value judgements and even reality itself into question; in so doing, anthropology makes a profound contribution to the analysis of man's place in the world (p. 15).

Herskovits has bundled two distinct claims into cultural relativism: moral relativism and cognitive relativism. Moral judgements (e. g.

"cruelty to children is wrong") are "effective only so far as they agree with the orientations of a given people at a given period of their history". This is a slight misstatement on his part. The effectiveness of moral judgements is a factual matter. That cultures endorse certain moral standards and that these standards vary from place to place and over time is not in dispute. The question is whether there are or can be moral standards by which to judge the local moral standards of cultures. Arguing that judgements are based on experience and experience is enculturated, Herskovits holds the answer to be that there can be no transcultural moral assessment of diverse moral claims.

Even stronger is Herskovits' second claim, about cognition: reality (e.g. "all planets move in ellipses") is "defined and redefined by the ever-varied symbolisms of the innumerable languages of mankind". Since judgements about reality are both a product of enculturation and necessarily articulated in a particular language, it would seem to follow that their effectiveness (Herskovits could have said "truth") depends, again, on agreement "with the orientations of a given people at a given period of their history".

For Herskovits, the proper anthropological attitude to morality and to claims about reality is one of qualified assertion. What the anthropologist

can report is, Cruelty is wrong according to the X; the world is flat according to the Y. A question like, “Is cruelty wrong?”, cannot be answered outside of a cultural context. A question like, “Is the earth flat?”, also cannot be answered outside of a cultural context. What makes an answer to either kind of question a true answer is the fact of its endorsement by a culture. Thus the ancient philosophical questions of what is good and what is true are to be answered by factual ethnographic reports from different cultures. That different cultures differ in what they declare true and good shows the cultural relativist that no culture-transcending answers to the ancient questions are possible. Cultures are the ultimate authorities on truth and morality. Since they differ, there are multiple truths and multiple moralities.

## 2. Cultural Relativism is False

The first problem that cultural relativism raises is ethnographic: the anthropologist reporting the diverse views on reality and morality of the peoples studied must be careful not to give the impression that his subjects are cultural relativists. On the contrary, most societies, tribesmen and others, are not culturally relativist. Muslim, Christian and Jewish societies, for example, are, to the contrary, convinced that they possess certain knowledge of how the world is and the true morality handed to

them by God. Less developed cultures, of the kind that anthropologists used to specialise in, are equally invariably convinced that their knowledge of the world and of moral value are absolutely correct, and that those who differ from them are in error. With very few exceptions, this is true of all well-known anthropological subjects: Trobrianders, Nuer, Kwakiutl, Navaho, Bushmen, Berbers, Tuareg, Yir Yiront, Swat Pathans, Coorgs, Yanamamo, and so on.

A second problem that cultural relativism raises is also ethnographic, namely whether the doctrine that, “what is real and what is moral is relative to culture”, is endorsed by the culture from which the anthropologist comes and which he is addressing. Given what was said above, the answer has to be negative. Indeed, the use of polemical and persuasive rhetoric in the discursive writing of cultural relativists betrays that theirs is a minority view in the culture they address. The question can also be pursued more narrowly. Anthropology itself derives from a specific tradition in European culture, namely the Enlightenment culture of science. Science has always viewed its claims as transcending culture. If anything, the tradition of science was one of constantly confronting and attempting to change the views of reality that sustained and were sustained by the culture surrounding the scientist. Recall Descartes in

1637 contemplating the cultural diversity he had observed and writing that many things “although they seemed very extravagant and ridiculous to us are nevertheless commonly accepted and approved in other great nations; and so I learned not to believe too firmly in anything of which I had been persuaded only by example and custom” (*Discourse*, I, 10 (Cottingham)). Again, later in the *Discourse*, “Thus it is more custom and example that persuade us than certain knowledge, and for all that, the majority opinion is not a proof worth anything for truths that are a bit difficult to discover” (*Discourse*, II, 16 (Cress)).

It is easy to underestimate the reach of this objection. For anthropologists to adopt a relativist stance towards their objects of study is for them to distort in fundamental ways the ethnographic facts about scientific endeavour, including their own. For them to adopt a relativistic attitude to their own work and results is to abandon the goal of scientific study, that is, to abandon allegiance to the culture that produced anthropology and in so doing to abandon anthropology as science. People may choose to call what they do anthropology whilst admitting that all they have to offer is local truth, i.e. folk wisdom, i.e. fiction (Leach 1989). The culture of the Enlightenment from which the tradition of anthropology stems would classify this as disingenuous.



### 3. Cultural Relativism is Incoherent

There is an incoherence within cultural relativism between its moral relativism and its cognitive relativism. Moral relativism says (MR) there can be no transcultural moral assessment of moralities. Cognitive relativism says (CR) claims to knowledge, such as (MR) , can only be locally assessed, relative to a culture. So (MR) cannot be presented as a culture- transcending result of scientific anthropology. Thus cognitive relativism makes (MR) locally true and generally false, hence false.

Cognitive relativism is itself internally incoherent: "Is reality. ..not defined and redefined by the ever-varied symbolisms of the innumerable languages of mankind?" wrote Herskovits. Call this strong cultural relativism (SCR). Either (SCR) is a reality-claim subject to the symbolisms of the innumerable languages of mankind, i. e. false sometimes, i. e. false; or (SCR) transcends such limitations and it is true. If it is the first it is no more than a report on the false outlook of the anthropological tribe; if the latter, (SCR) is a counter-example to itself. So to state (SCR) is either to say something of no philosophical interest or to contradict oneself.

More generally: "all judgements are relative to culture" is a judgement, call it (J). We may now construct a dilemma: Is the truth of

(J) relative to a culture? If the answer is yes, then, since (J) is relative to a culture, (J) is not universally or absolutely true. If it is not absolutely true that all judgements are relative to culture, the possibility that there are judgements true independently of culture is not closed and (J) may be absolutely true. If the answer is no, then (J) is a case of a true judgement not itself relative to culture. The existence of one case opens the possibility of a class of such judgements. Thus the very attempt to formulate (J) opens rather than closes what it tries to forbid. Thus cultural relativism fatally affects its own assertion: it cannot be coherently formulated. To say that values are relative to cultures confuses culture with value. Values are used to measure cultures, including the culture that gives birth to them. If values cannot transcend cultures how can cultures engage in self-assessment? When we judge the reality-claims, or moral standards, of our own culture to be wanting, what sort of standards are we invoking? They cannot be merely the "orientations of a given people at a given period in their history" simply because it may be the given orientations of this period that are being challenged in this period. When such criticisms are made, when, in our own society, people ask us to be more scientifically realistic (as Galileo did in the Dialogue Concerning the Two Great World Systems), or to reform our moral outlook (as

countless religious and ethical teachers have urged, from Socrates forward) , they challenge rather than accept the "given orientations". According to cultural relativism this cannot be done; the web of enculturation is inescapable. This claim is as though one were to argue that because humans are a product of their genetic inheritance and their cultural upbringing they can never have a new or independent thought of their own or assess their own conduct, or assess their own means of assessment of ideas or of conduct.

#### 4. Explaining the Vogue of Cultural Relativism

Given the manifest ethnographic falsity and logical incoherence of cultural relativism, explaining its vogue poses a profound anthropological problem. Is its popularity in anthropology a question of credo quia absurdum? That is, is subscription to it a test of faith, a condition of membership? In so far as its opposite is seen as ethnocentrism then the answer is of course 'yes'. Rejecting ethnocentrism is a mark of the anthropologist. So, subscribing to cultural relativism is a necessary condition for admission to membership of the anthropological guild.

The usual argument for rejecting ethnocentrism is that it is parochial, i. e. unscientific. By contrast, a culturally relativist anthropologist seeks to be universal, i. e. scientific. Discovery of the incoherence of cultural

relativism, however, creates a crisis of faith and leads some to hold that in order to escape ethnocentrism we must sacrifice the very idea of contemplating society in a scientific manner. All that anthropology can possibly consist in, on this despairing view, is endless contextual iteration and description. I sometimes think Clifford Geertz practised this (Geertz 1973; 1983) but he writes cagily and has been criticised for it by some of his students (Leach 1989, 141-42). Those who look to anthropology for more than a catalogue of exotica will find this kind of anthropology intellectually lacking. If we are not explaining society and its features using generalisations then of what possible intellectual interest is anthropology? The more radical of Geertz's critics suspect even the descriptive project of ethnocentrism and propose that anthropology consist of reflexive textual analyses of attempts to do anthropology (Boon 1982; Schweder and Levine 1984; Rabinow, Clifford and Marcus 1986; see also Geertz 1988). The rhetoric of anthropology, rather than social and cultural fact, becomes the stuff of anthropology.

##### 5. Why Cultural Relativism is Believed

Faced with the choice between cultural relativism and ethnocentrism the anthropologist feels bound to opt for cultural relativism.

Ethnocentrism is the view that one's own culture, and its values, are to be

preferred, perhaps the only correct ones. It is the endorsing of custom and example. Since anthropologists study multiple cultures with multiple values they can hardly adhere to ethnocentrism and keep open minds. Without open minds it is hard to present other cultures sympathetically, in their own terms. In their struggle against ethnocentrism anthropologists see the need to endorse all cultures as valid forms of life, possessing internal coherence and rationality.

That the system of values and cognition of each culture can be so presented goes without saying for an anthropologist. That these systems cannot be ranked on some transcultural scale from primitive to modern, also goes without saying. Aboriginal peoples are not contemporary ancestors; intellectual progress is hard enough to assess, in rules governing human relations it is next to impossible. Most societies make cognitive sense of their world and live by moral rules. The anthropologist should undertake simply to show that this is so.

A problem arises, however, when anthropologists try to draw an inference to the effect that just because a cognitive system makes sense of things there is no position from which to declare some of its assertions erroneous. In our own European history there are many counter-examples. The erroneous view that the stars move around the earth was once official

doctrine in our culture and it was criticised and overthrown from within. Notoriously, the Ptolemaic system of epicycles could accommodate all the known facts and need never have been given up. Yet it was given up, and for good reasons. This is a phenomenon that cultural relativism is unable to save. The overthrow of the earth-centred view was the outcome of a lengthy struggle about by what means such culturally entrenched and endorsed ideas could possibly be overthrown (cf. Bellarmino versus Galileo). What this teaches us is a general lesson. Polarising the issue between cultural relativism and ethnocentrism creates a false dilemma. There is a via media: autonomous and self-critical thinking, or rationality. Ideas are not correct because they are endorsed by a culture, and they are not incorrect because they are rejected by a culture. Their status is decided by other means. Admittedly, it is more difficult to point to clear-cut and rational advances in moral understanding or even moral behaviour that parallel our increased understanding of the physical universe. Yet if we simply explain our sense of moral improvement by caprice or power shifts then we condescend to ourselves and others. One of the reasons we in our culture engage in moral discussion and debate is in the quest to improve not just our moral behaviour, but also our moral standards. Why should we not extend this understanding to cultural others?

Two conclusions recommend themselves: anthropologists should couple their opposition to ethnocentrism with an opposition to anti-ethnocentrism, that is, neither the Other nor their own heritage should be disrespected; and respect requires them to report that their own heritage centres on science, technology, and liberalism which in ethnographic fact claim universal standing.

#### 6. Cultural Relativism and Method

Cultural relativism construed as the repudiation of ethnocentrism constitutes an attitude highly appropriate for field-work. The attitude it promotes is one of expecting and seeking out difference, assuming and imputing rationality, and withholding judgement or censure. All the best fieldwork should be informed by such attitudes. In so far as cultural relativism is merely a name for that methodological approach, then it is co-terminus with good anthropology, as is sometimes claimed.

Equipped with this attitude, which they translated into a method (Hanson 1975), cultural anthropologists were thrilled to discover that there is a wide diversity of moral and ontological claims made around the world. Neither in the judgement and evaluation of actions, nor in considerations of the world picture, do human societies agree with one another (or even within themselves). Those disenchanted with or in

rebellion against the values and outlook of their own society find this an exciting aspect of anthropology. Perfectly orderly and admirable societies exist which affirm different values and views of the world. Thus we often find anthropologists implicitly holding up the values and world-views of their subjects as admirable, even superior to those of industrial/scientific societies, especially in their attitudes to nature and to the earth. Cultural relativism does nothing to check such romanticism, only noticing the inconsistency of such insinuations can do so.

#### 7. Implications of the Method

The facts of morality and cognition discovered by the cultural relativist method seem to have prescriptive implications: if values and judgements of the real vary with culture, then none is superior, i. e. correct (and the others incorrect). We have seen that there are various problems with this. The ethnographic problem is that cultures mostly affirm their values and world view as not only correct but as the only correct ones: others are incorrect and possibly even wicked. The conceptual problem is this: if cultures hold views about values and about the world that are inconsistent with one another then they cannot all be true. Finally, nothing prescriptive follows from factual premisses. The fact that we differ on a matter does not lead to the conclusion that we



ought to differ or that differing is good. Moral and ontological diversity is a problem, not a solution. Whether the earth is the centre of the universe, whether slavery should be judged wicked, are not matters to be decided by a poll of views around the world. Most societies in most of history have been mistaken in their views on both matters. It is an ethnographic fact that in our Western culture we take our present positions on the universe and on slavery to be nearer the truth. Cultural relativism as method must report this, even though it makes no sense within cultural relativism.

So the method associated with cultural relativism delivers interesting facts, but cultural relativism as an idea offers a confused interpretation of those facts (Spiro 1986). Can there be, then, a warrant for the same method that does not appeal to cultural relativism? The answer is clear: the general principles of scientific open-mindedness are more than sufficient to warrant the method of fieldwork. Common sense, much of it ethnocentric, provides a huge stock of assertions about other peoples that invite testing and refuting. One hundred years of anthropology also supplies a large number of more refined assertions about the general explanatory principles that govern human social organisation, and these too can be subjected to empirical test by the method of fieldwork. Thus

fieldwork can be problem-oriented, critical, and opposed to ethnocentrism, without the necessity of any appeal to cultural relativism.

#### 8. Attacking the Critics of Cultural Relativism

One of the best forms of defence is attack. Thus cultural relativists have a tendency to impute to their critics either ethnocentrism or simple factual ignorance of just how different the factual and moral judgements of other societies are (Geertz 1984). Herskovits's argument about language has been strengthened into the extreme claim that languages are so different that translation, never mind evaluation, of cultural differences is impossible. However, even within the familiar culture of Christian Europe, historically considered, almost all the relevant issues show themselves. That is to say, the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome, for example, are both extremely alien and manifestly ancestral to present-day Europeans. Thus the question becomes, did we modern Europeans get here from our ancient European there by whim and accident, or was there some sort of learning process, some progress? No-one would deny there were elements of whim and accident, but we would also want to say that in technology, agriculture, cognition, writing systems, and social organisation, there has been progress that transcends each unit we choose to consider a culture. The evolution of law and trial, for example,

progressively improves through Greece, Rome, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment. This knowledge and institutional invention becomes part of the heritage of humanity, so that any culture, anywhere, contemplating setting up a state and a system of law, consults the European historical record (among others) for useful ideas.

#### 9. Who is Liberal. Who is Illiberal?

Anthropologists accuse each other of illiberal tendencies, for example, of neo-colonialism (Asad 1973) or of Orientalism (Said 1978; cp. Lewis 1993). They accuse themselves of treating the Other with less than the respect due to a fellow-human, including failure to endorse the Others' culture and identity.

The embattled anthropologist is likely to feel baffled because in his own culture his way of treating people with respect is to acknowledge differences by engaging with them robustly. For example, those who try to say this is a Christian civilisation and should teach its outlook and values to the young are robustly countered by those who say it is a liberal civilisation and should be careful not to impose mainstream or merely majority views on the young. Liberalism requires that we respect and listen to all viewpoints: it does not involve endorsing anything we

consider error: indeed, if we are not to be condescending, liberalism sometimes imposes a duty on us to point out error.

At this point a deeper anthropological error emerges in cultural relativism: societies and cultures are not homogeneous and integrated. Or, more precisely, societies and cultures are homogeneous and integrated only under certain descriptions. Conformity to custom seldom if ever reaches one hundred per cent. Even a description of a language, the backbone of culture, is a simplification of diversities of usage, vocabulary cluster, and idiolect. The same is true of generalisations about the ideas held in a culture concerning the world and human conduct. No society is homogeneous in these matters, and in almost all societies they are the subject of incessant discussion and dispute. Thus, in a strict sense, there is no homogeneous and unified culture to which cognitive and moral assertions can be relativised. We identify social and cultural units for a purpose, and for the purposes of cognition and morality we might do well to view human groups as shifting arenas of dispute and debate. For other purposes, we may lump together groups widely spread in time and in space, as when we think of Europe as a culture area, or of science as a tradition with an associated culture that is open to all persons of good will.

#### 10. The True Anthropological Situation

The human predicament as disclosed by historical sociology is that there was a huge cognitive leap forward at one time and place, namely Europe (Gellner 1988). This Scientific Revolution dwarfed most prior cognitive efforts (Gellner 1965, 1992). Since then, science has been a progressive, far from socially neutral, and technologically powerful force. Coming to terms with its power, its universality, and its indifference to local society and culture is a deep problem of which relativists have yet to recognise the ethnographic dimensions. What is less clear-cut is the situation in the sphere of value. Our moral language often mimics cognitive language, and we assume there is moral progress: that is, we assume a society of law is better than one without, that knowledge is a better condition than ignorance, that equality of persons, including females, is better than inequality, that societies which do not kill their citizens are better than those that do. Latterly, and even more of a challenge, have come questions of demography and ecology, where we can argue that societies that curb population growth and minimise the depredation of non-renewable resources are better than those that do not. These are all value judgements that most anthropologists endorse and live by and that most of the societies they have studied are very far from endorsing.

In view of all this I ask, “How can one any longer be a cultural relativist?”

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