

Handout 2: Cultural Relativism

“For if anyone, no matter, who were given the opportunity of choosing from amongst all the nations of the world the set of beliefs which he thought best, he would inevitably, after careful consideration of their relative merits, choose that of his own country. Everyone without exception believes that his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best. ‘Custom is the King over All.’” –Herodotus, *Histories*

1. What is Cultural Relativism?

Cultural relativism (CR) is a theory about the nature of morality which contends that (i) there are no objective, universal moral rules and (ii) the moral rules that do exist are culture-bound. In other words,

there is the *negative* claim there are no moral claims such as *killing is wrong* that would apply to every culture, and

there is the *positive* claim that there are moral rules but they vary depending upon the culture, society, context.

Concerning the positive claim, what CR contends is that what is **morally permissible** is what accords with socially approved customs or standards while what is **morally wrong** is what goes against the customs or standards of society. If you do an action *e* in one culture, it might be morally acceptable, whereas if you perform *e* in another culture, it would be morally wrong.

An Extreme Example: The *Jivaro* are an Indian clan. They are known to be an intensely warlike group, tremendously protective of their freedom and unwilling to subordinate themselves to other authorities. In this fierce society, headhunting and shrinking the heads is a process much revered and honored. This practice is morally permissible. In contrast, in the U.S., chopping off someone’s head then trying to preserve it is not only a criminal offence, but held by almost everyone to be immoral. According to CR, there is no objective, universal rule that says headhunting is wrong. Rather, it is morally permissible (even admirable) for the *Jivaro*, while it is morally wrong from those in the U.S.

CR holds that moral norms are relative to cultures *geographically* defined but also those *temporally* defined. What was morally acceptable in 2013 in the USA might not be the same as what was morally acceptable in 1790 in the USA.

A Common Confusion: CR is not to be confused with the claim that *everyone ought to be tolerant of other cultures*. If you accept CR, you deny that there are objective (transcultural) moral principles. The claim that *you should be tolerant of other cultures* is a claim that *cultural tolerance* is an objective good that applies to all cultures. But, CR allows for the possibility of a culture that there is a culture that is *intolerant* to other cultures as there are no objective moral rules.

2. Cultural Relativism is not a descriptive claim

Cultural relativism is a *normative* claim about what is right or wrong. It says that moral rightness/wrongness of an act is not something that you can specify independently of the culture in which the act is performed. This claim is controversial since it specifies **what is in fact morally right/wrong**: moral rightness/wrongness is culture-bound.

Descriptive (sociological) cultural relativism (DCR) about morals, in contrast, is the descriptive claim that **what people believe** to be morally right or wrong varies from culture to culture. It does not say whether what they believe is true or false. Rather, you can believe in descriptive cultural relativism but deny CR by believing the following:

Cultures have different moral codes, but many of these codes are flawed. There is a set of objective moral rules that apply to all cultures, independent of whether that culture believes those rules.

A Common Confusion: DCR does not say that there is no cultural overlap. It says instead that there are **some** differences about what people think concerning morality. Thus, it is possible that all cultures have *some* values in common.

There is sometimes a tendency to see *cultural differences concerning ethics* when the difference is due to (i) **situational differences** or (ii) **differences in beliefs about the world**.

Example #1: Two cultures A & B might appear different because A allows infanticide while B does not. But, it may be the case that they have the same moral views, it is just that infanticide is permitted in cultural A because living conditions are extremely harsh and individuals would starve if infanticide were not permitted.

Example #2: If A and B both believe you should never kill a being that has a soul, but A thinks only full-grown people have souls, while B thinks that children also have soul, then in A it may be morally permissible to kill children whereas it is not in A.

CDQ #1: In most Western cultures, suicide is regarded as immoral. In the Japanese tradition of hara-kiri, on the other hand, suicide is regarded as an honorable and moral action. Suicide bombers are also held in high esteem in some Arab cultures. Do these differences in attitudes toward suicide reflect a fundamental difference in basic moral principles regarding the intrinsic value of human life?¹

3. Arguments for Cultural Relativism

Let's begin with a simple argument for CR:

A Simple Argument for Cultural Relativism

P1. If different cultures have different moral codes, then right and wrong are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.

P2. Different societies/cultures have different moral codes

C. Therefore, there is no objective moral "truth," only cultural relativism.

As we noted early, P2 is the uncontroversial claim that different societies *believe* different things about which actions are morally good as opposed to evil. The key premise then is **P1**, which there are several reasons to deny.

¹ Partially taken from Judith A. Boss's *Ethics for Life: A Text with Readings*. 3rd ed. p.107.

Objection #1: Rejection of P1

The fact that two cultures disagree about what is morally right or wrong does not imply that there is no fact to the matter. For example, two cultures might disagree about whether the world is flat or spherical. But, it does not follow from their disagreement that the world is not either flat or spherical.

Objection #1.1: Rejection of P1

Even if different cultures have different moral codes, this does not imply that they *ought* to have different moral codes. What *is* the case does not determine what *ought* to be the case. For example, suppose you decided to skip class on Friday, this does not mean you *ought to have skipped class* (there could have been a big test!)

Even if a stronger argument than the **Simple Argument** could be put forward in favor of CR. This argument would have to deal with some of the following arguments against CR.

Objection #2: Cultural Nihilism

P1. The only things that exist are individual material beings and/or collections of these beings that have definite limits.

P2. A culture is not a material being (it is a sociological construct) and it does not have definite limits.

IC. There is no such thing as a culture.

P3. Cultural relativism depends upon the existence of cultures.

C. Therefore, cultural relativism is false.

Objection #3: There are Transcultural Moral Rules.

P1 in the Simple Argument assumes that there are no transcultural (objective) moral rules, but there are many horrific examples that make us think this claim is false.

P1. All forms of CR deny objective, universal moral rules.

P2. There is at least one objective, universal moral rule, e.g. do not killing for no reason, protect the young, tell the truth.

C. Therefore, CR is false.

CDQ #1: The key premise in this argument is **P2**. Come up with the best argument/example you can in support of it.

CDQ #2: In Northern India and China, the birth of a female is often regarded as a great tragedy. Many women undergo amniocentesis to determine the gender of their fetus. An estimated eight to ten thousand fetuses were aborted in Bombay alone between 1978 and 1982 because they were female. In the United States, the selective abortion of females is legal; nevertheless, the majority of us consider amniocentesis for sex selection to be immoral. However, we generally have few qualms about using amniocentesis to detect Down's syndrome or spina bifida in the fetus so he/she can be aborted. Is there a *morally relevant* difference between the abortion of a female fetus and the abortion of an individual with Down's syndrome? Or, is the difference between the two simply cultural?²

4. Some Closing Thoughts

In sum, CR accepts (1)–(3) and then some individuals that accept CR might also accept (4) and (5):

² Partially taken from Judith A. Boss's *Ethics for Life: A Text with Readings*. 3rd ed. p.124.

1. *Descriptive cultural relativism*: Different societies have different moral codes
2. *The Negative Claim*: There is no “universal truth” in ethics – that is, there are no moral truths that hold for all peoples at all times. All moral truths are relative.
3. *The Positive Claim*: The moral code of a society determines what is right within a society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action *is* right, at least within that society.
4. *Tolerance Principle*: It is mere arrogance for us to judge the conduct of people outside of society. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the practice of other cultures.
5. *The Unspecial Principle*: The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is merely one among many.

Even if you reject CR, there are at least two things you might accept but not be a cultural relativist. **First**, CR warns us about the dangers of assuming that *all* of our moral beliefs that we have are rationally justified and apply to all cultures. Upon being exposed to other cultures (or upon greater reflection), we may find that *at least some* of our moral beliefs are not really supported by any rational argument. CR thus acts as a kind of **antidote to cultural prejudice**.

Second, CR encourages us to consider how **situational differences** might impact what is *in fact* morally permissible. In a culture where it is very easy to put your child up for adoption, where contraceptives are readily available, and sex education is widely available, it might be morally wrong to have an abortion. In contrast, in a culture where is no adoption available, where contraceptives are against the law, and where sex education is not available, it might be morally permissible to have an abortion. This is not to say what is morally right and wrong is relative to the culture; rather CR encourages to **look at situational differences before we condemn a culture**.

CDQ #1: individuals have strong beliefs about funeral practices and nudity but to what extent are these beliefs *moral*?

CDQ #2: do you anticipate (or have you had) any pressure to change your moral beliefs now that you are in college? If yes, what changes do perceive (good or bad)? With cultural relativism in mind, how might someone try to convince you to do otherwise? How do you think you will respond?

READING QUESTIONS

1. What is cultural relativism?
2. True or false: cultural relativists think there are some objective, transcultural, universal moral values?
3. What is one of the five propositions generally claimed by cultural relativism?
4. How does Cultural Relativism differ from descriptive cultural relativism about morals (i.e., sociological relativism)?