

The Challenge of Cultural Relativism

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“Morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits.” Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (1934)

2.1. Different Cultures Have Different Moral Codes

Darius, a king of ancient Persia (present-day Iran), was intrigued by the variety of cultures he met in his travels. In India, for example, he had encountered a group of people known as the Callatians who cooked and ate the bodies of their dead fathers. The Greeks, of course, did not do that—they practiced cremation and regarded the funeral pyre as the proper way to dispose of the dead. Darius thought that an enlightened outlook should appreciate such differences. One day, to teach this lesson, he summoned some Greeks who were at his court and asked them what it would take for them to eat their dead fathers’ bodies. The Greeks were shocked, as Darius knew they would be. No amount of money, they said, could possibly get them to do such a thing. Then Darius called in some Callatians and, while the Greeks listened, asked if they would be willing to burn their dead fathers’ bodies. The Callatians were horrified and told Darius not to speak of such things.

This story, recounted by Herodotus in his *History*, illustrates a recurring theme in the literature of social science: Different cultures have different moral codes. What is thought to be right within one group may horrify another group, and vice versa. Should we eat the bodies of our dead or burn them? If you were Greek, one answer would seem obviously correct; but if you were Callatian, then the other answer would seem certain.

There are many examples of this. Consider the Eskimos of the early and mid-20th century. The Eskimos are the native people of Alaska, northern Canada, Greenland, and northeastern Siberia, in Asiatic Russia. Today, none of these groups call themselves “Eskimos,” but the term has historically referred to that scattered Arctic population. Prior to the 20th century, the outside world knew little about them. Then explorers began to bring back strange tales.

The Eskimos lived in small settlements, separated by great distances, and their customs turned out to be very different from ours. The men often had more than one wife, and they would share their wives with guests, lending them out for the night as a sign of hospitality. Within a community, a dominant male might demand—and get—regular sexual access to other men’s wives. The women, however, were free to break these arrangements simply by leaving their husbands and taking up with new partners—free, that is, insofar as their former husbands did not make too much trouble. All in all, the Eskimo custom of marriage was a volatile practice, very unlike our own custom.

But it was not only their marriages and sexual practices that were different. The Eskimos also seemed to care less about human life. Infanticide, for example, was common. Knud Rasmussen, an early explorer, reported meeting a woman who had borne 20 children but had killed 10 of them at birth. Female babies, he found, were killed more often than males, and this was allowed at the parents' discretion, with no social stigma attached. Moreover, when elderly family members became too feeble, they were left out in the snow to die.

Most of us would find these Eskimo customs completely unacceptable. Our own way of living seems so natural and right to us that we can hardly conceive of people who live so differently. When we hear of such people, we might think of them as being "backward" or "primitive." But to anthropologists, the Eskimos did not seem unusual. Since the time of Herodotus, enlightened observers have known that conceptions of right and wrong differ from culture to culture. If we assume that everyone shares our values, then we are merely being naïve.

2.2. Cultural Relativism

To many people, this observation—"Different cultures have different moral codes"—seems like the key to understanding morality. There are no universal moral truths, they say; the customs of different societies are all that exist. To call a custom "correct" or "incorrect" would imply that we can judge it by some independent or objective standard of right and wrong. But, in fact, we would merely be judging it by the standards of our own culture. No *independent* standard exists; every standard is culture-bound. The sociologist William Graham Sumner (1840–1910) put it like this:

The "right" way is the way which the ancestors used and which has been handed down. . . . The notion of right is in the folkways. It is not outside of them, of independent origin, and brought to test them. In the folkways, whatever is, is right. This is because they are traditional, and therefore contain in themselves the authority of the ancestral ghosts. When we come to the folkways we are at the end of our analysis.

This line of thought, more than any other, has persuaded people to be skeptical about ethics. Cultural Relativism says, in effect, that there is no such thing as universal truth in ethics; there are only the various cultural codes. Cultural Relativism challenges our belief in the objectivity and legitimacy of moral judgments.

The following claims have all been emphasized by cultural relativists:

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; so, if a society says that a certain action is right, then that action *is* right, at least in that society.

3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code as better than another's. There are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times.
4. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is but one among many.
5. It is arrogant for us to judge other cultures. We should always be tolerant of them.

The second claim—that right and wrong are determined by the norms of society—is at the heart of Cultural Relativism. However, it may seem to conflict with the fifth claim, which is that we should always be tolerant of other cultures. Should we *always* tolerate them? What if the norms of our society favor *not* tolerating them? for example, when the Nazi army invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, thus beginning World War II, this was an intolerant action of the first order. But what if it conformed to Nazi ideals? A cultural relativist, it seems, cannot criticize the Nazis for being intolerant, if all they're doing is following their own moral beliefs.

Given that cultural relativists take pride in their tolerance, it would be ironic if their theory actually supported the intolerance of warlike societies. However, their theory need not do that. Properly understood, Cultural Relativism holds that the norms of a culture reign supreme *within the bounds of the culture itself*. Once the German soldiers entered Poland, they became bound by the norms of Polish society—norms that obviously excluded the mass slaughter of innocent Poles. “When in Rome,” the old saying goes, “do as the Romans do.” Cultural relativists agree.

2.3. The Cultural Differences Argument

Cultural Relativists often make a certain type of argument. They begin with facts about cultures and wind up drawing a conclusion about morality. For example, they invite us to accept this reasoning:

- (1) The Greeks believed it was wrong to eat the dead, whereas the Callatians believed it was right to eat the dead.
- (2) Therefore, eating the dead is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion, which varies from culture to culture.

Or:

- (1) The Eskimos saw nothing wrong with infanticide, whereas Americans believe that infanticide is immoral.
- (2) Therefore, infanticide is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion, which varies from culture to culture.

Clearly, these arguments are variations of one fundamental idea. They are both examples of a more general argument, which says:

- (1) Different cultures have different moral codes.
- (2) Therefore, there is no objective truth in morality. Right and wrong are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.

Let's call this the *Cultural Differences Argument*. To many people, it is persuasive. But is it a good argument—is it sound?

It is not. For an argument to be *sound*, its premises must all be true, and its conclusion must logically *follow from* them. Here, the problem is that the conclusion does not follow from the premise—that is, even if the premise is true, the conclusion might still be false. The premise concerns what people *believe*—in some societies, people believe one thing; in other societies, people believe something else. The conclusion, however, concerns what *really is the case*. This sort of conclusion does not follow logically from that sort of premise. In philosophical terminology, this means that the argument is *invalid*.

Consider again the example of the Greeks and Callatians. The Greeks believed it was wrong to eat the dead; the Callatians believed it was right. Does it follow, *from the mere fact that they disagreed*, that there is no objective truth in the matter? No, it does not; there might be an objective truth that neither party sees, or a truth that *only one party* sees.

To make the point clearer, consider a different matter. In some societies, people believe the earth is flat. In other societies, such as our own, people believe that the earth is a sphere. Does it follow, from the mere fact that people disagree, that there is no “objective truth” in geography? Of course not; we would never draw such a conclusion, because we realize that the members of some societies might simply be wrong. Even if the world is round, some people might not know it. Similarly, there might be some moral truths that are not universally known. The Cultural Differences Argument tries to derive a moral conclusion from the mere fact that people disagree. But this is impossible.

This point should not be misunderstood. We are not saying that the conclusion of the argument is false; for all we have said, it could still be true. The point is that the Cultural Differences Argument *does not prove* that it is true. Rather, the argument fails.

2.4. What Follows from Cultural Relativism

If Cultural Relativism were true, then what would follow from it?

In the passage quoted earlier, William Graham Sumner states the essence of Cultural Relativism. He says that the only measure of right and wrong is the standards of one's society: “The notion of right is in the folkways. It is not outside of them, of independent origin, and brought to test them. In the folkways, whatever is, is right.” Suppose we took this seriously. What would be some of the consequences?

1. *We could no longer say that the customs of other societies are morally inferior to our own.* This is one of the main points stressed by Cultural Relativism—that we should never condemn a society merely because it is “different.” This attitude seems enlightened, especially when we concentrate on examples like the funerary practices of the Greeks and Callatians.

However, if Cultural Relativism were true, then we would also be barred from criticizing other, more harmful practices. For example, the Chinese government has a long history of repressing political dissent within its own borders. At any given time, thousands of prisoners in China are doing hard labor on account of their political views, and in the Tiananmen Square episode of 1989, Chinese troops slaughtered hundreds, if not thousands, of peaceful protesters. Cultural Relativism would prevent us from saying that the Chinese government’s policies of oppression are wrong. We could not even say that respect for free speech is *better* than the Chinese practice, for that too would imply a universal or objective standard of comparison. However, refusing to condemn *these* practices does not seem enlightened; on the contrary, political oppression seems wrong wherever it occurs. Yet if we accept Cultural Relativism, then we have to regard such practices as immune from criticism.

2. *We could no longer criticize the code of our own society.* Cultural Relativism suggests a simple test for determining what is right and what is wrong: All we need to do is ask whether the action is in line with the code of the society in which it occurs. Suppose a resident of India wonders whether her country’s caste system—a system of rigid social hierarchy—is morally correct. All she has to do is ask whether this system conforms to her society’s moral code. If it does, then there is no way it can be wrong.

This implication of Cultural Relativism is disturbing because few of us think that our society’s code is perfect. Rather, we can think of ways in which it might be improved. We can also think of ways in which we might learn from other cultures. Yet Cultural Relativism stops us from criticizing our own society’s code, and it bars us from seeing ways in which other cultures might be better. After all, if right and wrong are relative to culture, this must be true for our own culture, just as it is for other cultures.

3. *The idea of moral progress is called into doubt.* We think that at least some social changes are for the better. For example, throughout most of Western history, the place of women in society was narrowly defined. Women could not own property; they could not vote or hold political office; and they were under the almost absolute control of their husbands or fathers. Recently, much of this has changed, and most of us think of this as progress.

But if Cultural Relativism is correct, can we legitimately view this as progress? Progress means replacing the old ways with new and improved ways. But by what standard can a Cultural Relativist judge the new ways as *better*? If the old ways

conformed to the standards of their time, then Cultural Relativists could not condemn them. After all, those old ways or traditions “had their own time and place,” and we should not judge *them* by *our* standards. Sexist 19th-century society was a different society from the one we now inhabit. Thus, a Cultural Relativist could not regard the progress that women have made over the centuries as being (real) progress— after all, to speak of “real progress” is to make just the sort of transcultural judgment that Cultural Relativism forbids.

According to Cultural Relativism, there is only one way to improve a society: to make it better match its own ideals. After all, those ideals will determine whether progress has been made. No one, however, may challenge the ideals themselves. According to Cultural Relativism, then, the idea of social reform makes sense only in this limited way.

These three consequences of Cultural Relativism have led many people to reject it. To take another example, we all want to condemn slavery wherever it occurs, and we all believe that the widespread abolition of slavery in the Western world was a mark of human progress. Because Cultural Relativism disagrees, it cannot be correct.

2.5. Why There Is Less Disagreement Than There Seems to Be

Cultural Relativism starts by observing that cultures differ dramatically in their views of right and wrong. But how much do they really differ? It is true that there are differences, but it is easy to exaggerate them. Often, what seems at first to be a big difference turns out to be no difference at all.

Consider a culture in which people condemn eating cows. This may even be a poor culture, in which there is not enough food; still, the cows are not to be touched. Such a society would appear to have values very different from our own. But does it? We have not yet asked *why* these folks won’t eat cows. Suppose they believe that, after death, the souls of humans inhabit the bodies of other types of animals, especially cows, so that a cow could be someone’s grandmother. Shall we say that their values differ from ours? No; the difference lies elsewhere. We differ in our beliefs, not in our values. We agree that we shouldn’t eat Grandma; we disagree about whether the cow might be Grandma.

The point is that many factors work together to produce the customs of a society. Not only are the society’s values important but so are its religious beliefs, its factual beliefs, and its physical environment. Thus, we cannot conclude that two societies differ in values just because they differ in customs. After all, customs may differ for a number of reasons. Thus, there may be less moral disagreement across cultures than there appears to be.

Consider again the Eskimos, who killed healthy infants, especially infant girls. We do not approve of such things; in our society, a parent who kills a baby will be locked up. Thus, there appears to be a great difference in the values of our two cultures. But suppose we ask why the Eskimos did this. The explanation is not that

they lacked respect for human life or that they did not love their children. An Eskimo family would always protect its babies if conditions permitted. But the Eskimos lived in a harsh environment, where food was scarce. To quote an old Eskimo saying: “life is hard, and the margin of safety small.” A family may want to nourish its babies but be unable to do so.

Several factors, in addition to the lack of food, explain why the Eskimos sometimes resorted to infanticide. For one thing, they lacked birth control, and so unwanted pregnancies were common. Another fact is that Eskimo mothers would typically nurse their infants over a much longer period than do mothers in our culture— for four years, and sometimes even longer. So, even in the best of times, one mother could sustain very few children. Moreover, the Eskimos were nomadic; unable to farm in the harsh arctic climate, they had to keep moving to find food. Infants had to be carried, and a mother could carry only one baby in her parka as she traveled and went about her outdoor work.

Infant girls were killed more often than boys for two reasons. First, in Eskimo society, the primary food providers were males— men were the hunters. Males were thus highly valued, because food was scarce. Second, the hunters suffered a high casualty rate. Eskimo men thus died prematurely far more often than Eskimo women did. If male and female infants had survived in equal numbers, then the female adult population would have greatly outnumbered the male adult population. Examining the available statistics, one writer concluded that “were it not for female infanticide . . . there would be approximately one-and-a-half times as many females in the average Eskimo local group as there are food-producing males.”

Thus, Eskimo infanticide was not due to a fundamental disregard for children. Instead, it arose from the fact that drastic measures were needed to ensure the group’s survival. And even then, killing the baby was always seen as the last resort—adoptions were common. Hence, Eskimo values were much like our own. It is only that life forced choices upon them that we do not have to make.

2.6. Some Values Are Shared by All Cultures

It should not surprise us that the Eskimos were protective of their children. How could they not have been? Babies are helpless and cannot survive without extensive care. If a group did not protect its young, the young would not survive, and the older members of the group would not be replaced. Eventually, the group would die out. This means that any enduring culture must have a tradition of caring for its children. Neglected infants must be the exception, not the rule.

Similar reasoning shows why honesty must be valued in every culture. Imagine what it would be like for a society to place no value on truth telling. In such a place, when one person spoke to another, there would be no presumption that she was being honest; she could just as easily be lying. Within that society, there would be no reason to pay attention to what anyone says. If, for example, I want to know what time it is, why should I bother asking anyone, if lying is commonplace?

Communication would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, in such a society. And because societies cannot exist without communication among their members, society would become impossible. It follows that every society must value truthfulness. There may, of course, be situations in which lying is permitted, but the society will still value honesty in most situations.

Consider another example. Could a society exist in which there was no rule against murder? What would such a place be like? Suppose people were free to kill one another at will, and no one disapproved. In such a society, no one could feel safe. Everyone would have to be constantly on guard, and everyone would try to avoid other people—those potential murderers—as much as possible. This would result in individuals trying to become self-sufficient. Society on any large scale would thus be impossible. Of course, people might still band together in smaller groups where they could feel safe. But notice what this means: They would be forming smaller societies that did acknowledge a rule against murder. The prohibition against murder, then, is a necessary feature of society.

There is a general point here, namely, that *there are some moral rules that all societies must embrace, because those rules are necessary for society to exist.* The rules against lying and murder are two examples. And, in fact, we do find these rules in force in all cultures. Cultures may differ in what they regard as legitimate exceptions to the rules, but the rules themselves are the same. Therefore, we shouldn't overestimate the extent to which cultures differ. Not every moral rule can vary from society to society.

A further point is that societies will often have the same values due to their shared human nature. There are some things that, in every society, most people want. For example, people everywhere want clean water, leisure time, good health care, and the freedom to choose their own friends. Common goals will often yield common values.

2.7. Judging a Cultural Practice to Be Undesirable

In 1996, a 17-year-old named Fauziya Kassindja arrived at Newark International Airport in New Jersey and asked for asylum. She had fled her native country of Togo, in West Africa, to escape what people there call “excision.” Excision is a permanently disfiguring procedure. It is sometimes called “female circumcision,” but it bears little resemblance to male circumcision. In the West, it is usually referred to as “female genital mutilation.”

According to the World Health Organization, more than 200 million living females have been excised. The cutting has occurred in 30 countries across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Sometimes excision is part of an elaborate tribal ritual performed in small villages, and girls look forward to it as their entry into the adult world. Other times, it is carried out in cities on young women who desperately resist.

Fauziya Kassindja was the youngest of five daughters. Her father, who owned a successful trucking business, was opposed to excision, and he was able to defy the tradition because of his wealth. Hence, his first four daughters were married without being mutilated. But when Fauziya was 16, he suddenly died. She then came under the authority of her aunt, who arranged a marriage for her and prepared to have her excised. Fauziya was terrified, and other members of her family helped her escape.

In America, Fauziya was imprisoned for nearly 18 months while the authorities decided what to do with her. During this time, she was subjected to humiliating strip searches, denied medical treatment for her asthma, and generally treated like a criminal. Finally, she was granted asylum, but not before her case aroused a great controversy. The controversy was not about her treatment in America, but about how we should regard the customs of other cultures. A series of articles in *The New York Times* encouraged the idea that excision is barbaric and should be condemned. Other observers, however, were reluctant to be so judgmental. Live and let live, they said; after all, our culture probably seems just as strange to the Africans.

Suppose we say that excision is wrong. Are we merely imposing the standards of our own culture? If Cultural Relativism is correct, that is all we can do, for there are no culture-independent moral standards. But is that true?

Is There a Culture-Independent Standard of Right and Wrong? Excision is bad in many ways. It is painful and results in the permanent loss of sexual pleasure. Its short-term effects can include severe bleeding, problems urinating, and septicemia. Sometimes it causes death. Its long-term effects can include chronic infection, cysts, and scars that hinder walking.

Why, then, has it become a widespread social practice? It is not easy to say. Excision has no obvious social benefits. Unlike Eskimo infanticide, it is not necessary for group survival. Nor is it a matter of religion. Excision is practiced by groups from various religions, including Islam and Christianity.

Nevertheless, a number of arguments are made in its defense. Women who are incapable of sexual pleasure are less likely to be promiscuous; so, there will be fewer unwanted pregnancies in unmarried women. Moreover, wives for whom sex is only a duty are less likely to cheat on their husbands; and because they are not thinking about sex, they will be more attentive to the needs of their husbands and children. Husbands, for their part, are said to enjoy sex more with wives who have been excised. Unexcised women, the husbands feel, are unclean and immature.

It would be easy to ridicule these arguments; they are flawed in many respects. But notice an important feature of them: They try to justify excision by showing that excision is beneficial—men, women, and their families are said to be better off when women are excised. Thus, we might approach the issue by asking whether excision, on the whole, is helpful or harmful.

This points to a standard that might reasonably be used in thinking about any social practice: *Does the practice promote or hinder the welfare of the people affected by it?* This standard may be used to assess the practices of any culture at any time. Of course, people will not usually see it as being “brought in from the outside” to judge them, because all cultures value human happiness. Nevertheless, this looks like just the sort of culture-independent moral standard that Cultural Relativism forbids.

Why, Despite All This, Thoughtful People May Be Reluctant to Criticize Other Cultures. Many people who are horrified by excision are nevertheless reluctant to condemn it, for three reasons. First, there is an understandable nervousness about interfering in the social customs of other peoples. Europeans and their descendants in America have a shameful history of destroying native cultures in the name of Christianity and enlightenment. Because of this, some people refuse to criticize other cultures, especially cultures that resemble those that were wronged in the past.

However, there is a big difference between (a) judging a cultural practice to be deficient and (b) thinking that our leaders should announce that fact, apply diplomatic pressure, and send in the troops. The first is just a matter of trying to see the world clearly, from a moral point of view. The second is something else entirely. Sometimes it may be right to “do something about it,” but often it will not be.

Second, people may feel, rightly enough, that we should be tolerant of other cultures. Tolerance, no doubt, is a virtue; a tolerant person can live in peace with those who see things differently. But nothing about tolerance requires us to say that all beliefs, all religions, and all social practices are equally admirable. On the contrary, if we did not view some things as better than others, then we would have nothing to tolerate.

Finally, people may be reluctant to judge because they do not want to express contempt for the society being criticized. But, again, this is misguided: To condemn a particular custom is not to condemn an entire culture. After all, a culture with a flaw can still have many admirable features. Indeed, we should expect this to be true of all human societies—all human societies are mixtures of good and bad practices. Excision happens to be one of the bad ones. ... ¹

¹ Notes on Sources

The story of the Greeks and the Callatians is from Herodotus, *The Histories*, translated by Aubrey de Selincourt, revised by A. R. Burn (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 219–220.

The information about the Eskimos is from Peter freuchen, *Book of the Eskimos* (New York: fawcett, 1961), and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Law of Primitive Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard u niversity Press, 1954), chapter 5. The estimate of how female infanticide affects the male/female ratio in the Eskimo population is from Hoebel.

William Graham Sumner, *Folkways* (Boston: Ginn, 1906), p. 28.

The New York Times series on female genital mutilation included articles (mainly by Celia W. Dugger) published in 1996 on April 15, April 25, May 2, May 3, July 8, September 11, October 5, October 12, and December 28. I learned much about Fauziya Kassindja from her PBS interview; see <http://www.pbs.org/speaktruthtopower/Fauziya.html>. The figures from the World Health Organization are from the WHO’s fact sheet on “female Genital Mutilation” (updated february 2017), at <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/>.