

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

To many thinkers, this observation—"different cultures have different moral codes"—has seemed to be the key to understanding morality. The idea of universal truth in ethics, they say, is a myth. The customs of different societies are all that exist. These customs cannot be said to be "correct" or "incorrect," for that implies we have an independent standard of right and wrong by which they may be judged. But there is no such independent standard; every standard is culture-bound. The great pioneering sociologist William Graham Sumner, writing in 1906, put it like this:

The "right" way is the way that the ancestors used and that has been handed down. The tradition is its own warrant. It is not held subject to verification by experience. 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.²

This line of thought has probably persuaded more people to be skeptical about ethics than any other single thing. *Cultural relativism*, as it has been called, challenges our ordinary belief in the objectivity and universality of moral truth. It says, in effect, that there is no such thing as universal truth in ethics; there are only the various cultural codes, and nothing more. Moreover, our own code has no special status; it is merely one among many. As we shall see, this basic idea is really a compound of several different thoughts.

It is important to distinguish the various elements of cultural relativism because, on analysis, some parts turn out to be correct, while others seem to be mistaken. The following claims have all been made by cultural relativists:

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that 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.
3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's codes better than another's. In other words, there is no "universal

²William Graham Sumner, *Folkways* (Boston: Ginn, 1906), p. 28. [J. RACHELS]

- truth" in ethics; 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 merely one among many.
 5. It is mere arrogance for us to try to judge the conduct of other peoples. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the practices of other cultures.

These five propositions may seem to go together, but they are independent of one another, in the sense that some of them might be false even if others are true. Indeed, two of them appear to be inconsistent with each other. The second proposition says that right and wrong are determined by the norms of a society; the fifth proposition says that we should always be tolerant of other cultures. But what if the norms of a society favor intolerance? For example, when the Nazi army marched into Poland on September 1, 1939, thus beginning World War II, this was an intolerant action of the first order. But what if it was in line with Nazi ideals? A cultural relativist, it seems, cannot criticize the Nazis for being intolerant, if all they're doing is following their own moral code.

Given that cultural relativists take pride in their tolerance, it would be ironic if their theory actually supported people in intolerant cultures being intolerant of other cultures. However, it need not have that implication. Properly understood, cultural relativism holds that the norms of a culture reign supreme *within the bounds of the culture itself*. Thus, 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.

THE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ARGUMENT

Cultural relativism is a theory about the nature of morality. At first blush it seems quite plausible. However, like all such theories, it may be evaluated by subjecting it to rational analysis; and when we analyze cultural relativism, we find that it is not so plausible as it first appears to be.

The first thing to notice is that at the heart of cultural relativism there is a certain *form of argument*. Cultural relativists argue from facts about the differences between cultural outlooks to a conclusion about the status of morality. Thus, we are invited 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, alternatively:

- (1) The Eskimos see nothing wrong with infanticide, whereas Americans believe 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 special cases 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.

We may call this the *cultural differences argument*. To many people, it is persuasive. But from a logical point of view, is it [a] sound [argument]?

It is not sound. The trouble is that the conclusion does not follow from the premise—that is, even if the premise is true, the conclusion still might be false. The premise concerns what people *believe*—in some societies, people believe one thing; in other societies, people believe differently. The conclusion, however, concerns what *really is the case*: The trouble is that this sort of conclusion does not follow logically from this sort of premise.

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 follow; it could be that the practice was objectively right (or wrong) and that one of them was simply mistaken.

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 the earth is (roughly) spherical. 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, in their beliefs about the world, the members of some societies might simply be wrong. There is no reason to think that if the world is round everyone must know it. Similarly, there is no reason to think that if there is moral truth everyone must know it. The fundamental mistake in the cultural differences argument is that it attempts to derive a substantive conclusion about a subject from the mere fact that people disagree about it.

This is a simple point of logic, and it is important not to misunderstand it. We are not saying that the conclusion of the argument is false. That is still an open question. The logical point is merely that the conclusion does not follow from the premise. This is important, because in order to determine whether the conclusion is true, we need arguments in its support. Cultural relativism proposes this argument, but it is fallacious. So it proves nothing.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF TAKING CULTURAL RELATIVISM SERIOUSLY

Even if the cultural differences argument is unsound, cultural relativism might still be true. What would it be like if it were true?

In the passage quoted above, William Graham Sumner summarizes the essence of cultural relativism. He says that there is no measure of right and wrong other than 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, of course, is one of the main points stressed by cultural relativism. We would have to stop condemning other societies merely because they are "different." So long as we concentrate on certain examples, such as the funerary practices of the Greeks and Callatians, this may seem to be a sophisticated, enlightened attitude.

However, we would also be stopped from criticizing other, less benign practices. For example, the Chinese government has a long tradition of suppressing political dissent within its own borders. At any given time, thousands of political prisoners in China are doing hard labor, and in the Tiananmen Square episode of 1989, Chinese troops slaughtered hundreds, if not thousands, of peaceful protesters. Cultural relativism would preclude us from saying that the Chinese government's policies of oppression are wrong. (We could not even say that a society that respects free speech is *better* than Chinese society, for that would imply a universal standard of comparison.) The failure to condemn *these* practices does not seem enlightened; on the contrary, political oppression seems wrong wherever it occurs. Nevertheless, if we accept cultural relativism, we have to regard such political practices as immune from criticism.

2. *We could decide whether actions are right or wrong just by consulting the standards of our society.* Cultural relativism suggests a simple test for determining what is right and what is wrong: All we need do is ask whether the action is in accordance with the code of the society in question. Suppose a resident of India wonders if her society's caste system—a system of rigid social hierarchy—is morally correct. All she has to do is ask whether this policy conforms to her society's moral code. If it does, there is nothing to worry about, at least from a moral point of view.

This implication of cultural relativism is disturbing because few of us think that our society's code is perfect—we can think of all sorts of ways in which it might be improved. Yet cultural relativism not only forbids us from criticizing the codes of *other* societies; it also stops us from criticizing our own. After all, if right and wrong are relative to culture, this must be true for our own culture just as much as 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. Throughout most of Western history the place of women in society was narrowly circumscribed. They could not own property; they could not vote or hold political office; and generally they were under the almost absolute control of their husbands. Recently much of this has changed, and most people think of it as progress.

But if cultural relativism is correct, can we legitimately view this as progress? Progress means replacing a way of doing things with a better way. But by what standard do we judge the new ways as better? If the old ways were in accordance with the social standards of their time, then cultural relativism would say it is a mistake to judge them by the standards of a different time. Eighteenth-century society was a different society from the one we have now. To say that we have made progress implies a judgment that present-day society is