

Cultural Relativism

by David Johnson

Herodotus, an ancient Greek historian who is widely regarded as the first historian in Western Civilization, traveled extensively and he noticed that people in each culture tend to believe that their way of doing things is the 'correct' way, and that other societies are wrong if they do something different. But based upon his experience and his study of other cultures, Herodotus reports in his *Histories* that he agreed with the poet Pindar that 'custom is king'.

It is certainly true that beliefs regarding morality differ from culture to culture. That was the case when Herodotus lived and it is just as true today. There have been civilizations in which human sacrifice, slavery, infanticide, and/or cannibalism have been considered morally acceptable. But of course to people in most civilizations those are considered to be some of the most abominable cultural practices.

What Herodotus was arguing for is known today as Cultural Relativism. A Cultural Relativist believes that ethical values are not absolute, they are relative to particular individuals, cultures, and/or time periods. No culture's values and beliefs are considered better or more rationally justified than any other.

Cultural Relativists argue that we can never truly escape the cultural values of the society that we come from, and it would be unfair to judge another person or society according to those standards rather than the standards of the society that they come from; therefore, Relativists conclude, we should refrain from making any moral judgments about them at all.

Many people are attracted to this view, and I can somewhat understand the appeal. It does seem like we should be tolerant, open-minded, and respectful of the beliefs of others, especially when we do not know very much about them or their culture. However, some of the logical implications of Cultural Relativism are far less appealing. For example, in the United States at the present time, domestic violence is considered very bad by the majority of people in the culture. But what if you lived in a society in which it happened frequently in most families and it was considered morally acceptable? Does that mean that domestic violence is not morally wrong for the people in that culture simply because they themselves do not think that it is wrong? A Cultural Relativist would be committed to saying yes. Oddly, many people who argue in favor of Cultural Relativism do not seem to realize that this is the case. Defenders often say that everybody should be tolerant and respectful of other cultures, but not if what they are doing is contrary to the core moral values that the defender holds dear, which are often liberal values. But you cannot pick and choose which practices and beliefs can be judged; either you and I can make moral judgements about the other culture and the people in it or we cannot.

If you believe that racism is wrong not just for our society but everywhere and always you are not really a Cultural Relativist.

For a Cultural Relativist there is no moral practice or belief that is objectively right or wrong outside of one's particular culture, so in a sense, everybody is right at the same time. We are right to say that domestic violence is morally wrong, because in our culture it is; people from another culture would be right to say that it is not if that is what their culture believes. If Cultural Relativism is true it is not possible for a culture to be wrong about its moral values and beliefs.

But is that really so? It is one thing to say that the members of a culture do not believe that a cultural practice is wrong, it is another to say that they are correct in that assessment. What about the Nazis during World War II? Can we not say that their cultural practices were immoral? Clearly the Jewish minority (along with others within German society and critics outside of it) thought that many of the things that the Nazis were doing during World War II were wrong, including putting Jews in concentration camps, doing horrible medical experiments on them and committing all sorts of other atrocities, and killing 6 million of them when they had committed no crime, and all of that was along with other war crimes that they committed such as attacking other countries without provocation. To at least part of the German culture of that time period these things were considered morally wrong even if they were not considered wrong by most of the Nazis.

The majority (or at least the people in positions of power) believed that slavery was morally permissible in the South during the 1850s. But there were abolitionists too. Even if you think that people in the North were in no position to judge the South (they were part of the same country, but it is unclear whether they were part of the same 'culture'), what about the abolitionists in the South? Don't their beliefs count? What about people who were part of the Underground Railroad? It seems like the Cultural Relativist is committed to saying that people who were part of the Underground Railroad acted immorally because they went against the standards of their culture, and there would be no other standard of right and wrong for them because there are purportedly no universal or even more general standards of right and wrong beyond their culture. People from other cultures and time periods should not admire them if that is the case. If we cannot make negative moral judgments about people in other cultures then we cannot make positive ones either.

These two examples lead to an important question: What counts as a 'culture'? Is it just the country in which we live and a particular time period? That seems too broad because members of a country like the United States differ greatly in their philosophical, religious, and political views. People living in San Francisco California have some things in common with people in rural Alabama, but they also have a lot of differences as well. What would account for those differences if Cultural Relativism is true? If all of our beliefs about ethics come from our culture then nobody within that culture could disagree with those values and beliefs and still be considered part of that culture. So either Cultural Relativists are wrong that we get all of our ideas about morality from our

culture or people in rural Alabama and people in San Francisco are not really part of the same culture. But then we may also ask how the various cultures got such different ideas about morality to begin with? Cultural Relativists say that the individual gets his or her ideas about ethics from the culture but they never explain where the culture gets its ideas.

Even the people that make up a small town can have beliefs that vary widely, such as about religion and/or politics, which influences their views about ethics. But perhaps we could attempt to define what a culture is according to race or ethnicity rather than geographical location. That will not work either, though, because members of the same race vary widely in their beliefs as well, and so also with gender. (Particularly when they are from different geographical locations.) You could not define it according to political party or religious sect either because once again there is some variation in beliefs.

It seems like any time there is any disagreement about moral beliefs the Cultural Relativist would be forced to say that there must be separate cultures. This would lead to a narrowing of the 'culture', perhaps all the way down to a single individual. Thus Cultural Relativism would be whittled down to Individual Relativism.¹

For Individual Relativism no one could ever be wrong about her moral beliefs because there are no universal moral standards and each person's opinion and preferences are considered just as good as any other. For Cultural Relativism the individual can be wrong if he violates the culture's ethical norms but the culture itself cannot be wrong because there are no universal moral standards and each culture's opinion and standards are as good as any other. But Cultural Relativists never address the problem of whether the individual can really be considered part of the culture if he or she disagrees with his/her culture's ethical norms, and why that individual has differing beliefs at all if ideas about right and wrong come from one's culture.

Personally, I think it is strange to argue that morality is the one thing that people can never be wrong about. For one thing, that would mean that what each culture or individual chooses to value is completely and totally arbitrary. There would be no good or bad reasons for one's preference. Are there not better reasons to value justice, honesty, integrity, fairness, etc., over their opposites? We believe there are experts in all sorts of other areas - I do not imagine that you would value your crazy uncle's opinion about what you should do to solve a medical problem as much as you would trust a doctor's opinion - or at least I hope not. Are they both equally adept at making you well? We do not say 'everybody is entitled to their own opinion' when we are talking about other subjects. Why would ethics be the one area in which there are no experts and everybody's opinion is equal?

¹ Individual Relativism is untenable, at least for anyone who chooses to live in a society. None of us can just make up our own rules without having any moral judgements made about us. A king may be able to get away with doing things that others cannot do, but he would still be considered unjust by others, therefore a moral judgement is being made about him, and rightly so.

But I guess one reason that Relativists do not think of ethics this way is that they do not believe that questions regarding values have a right or wrong answer. If two people make contradictory claims over whether the earth is flat then at least one of them must be wrong because that is a factual question. But Relativists think of ethical views and attitudes as being more a matter of personal taste (or that of the culture), similar to how many of us feel about fashion or aesthetics. Suppose I were to make the claim that chocolate ice cream is objectively a better flavor than strawberry. Would it even make sense to argue about that? I think most would say that whether I prefer the chocolate flavor or strawberry is just a matter of personal taste, there is no right or wrong answer as to which is better. Relativists consider ethics to be like that.

However, I am not convinced that what is good would be totally subjective and arbitrary even if it is a matter of taste. If that were true then wine tasters and food critics and professional musicians and literature professors would not have any better opinion in their respective areas of expertise than anybody else's.

Some people have more refined tastes than others. Sometimes a person is just naturally better at something, like someone who has perfect or absolute pitch (only about 1 in 10,000 people), but it is also true that experts have often spent a lot more time and effort. They have more refined tastes in part because of greater exposure. A movie critic has watched a hell of a lot of movies, so he or she probably has a better idea of what is good, having already watched 20,000 movies, than someone who has only watched a few, or only a few types of movies. A chef has learned a lot more than the average person about food and techniques that have been passed down for hundreds of years in some cases for how to prepare it well. A chef really is better at recognizing and being able to create food that tastes good than a beginner. To me it just seems obvious that an interior designer could design a home to be much more aesthetically pleasing (at least to the vast majority of people) than some straight single guy who has never given any thought to it. In painting and design, complementary color schemes, or monochromatic or analogous color schemes, really do look better than not having a color scheme. (Harmony is different than random noise.) It is not just the expert's training or indoctrination, it really is better. Rembrandt was a better painter than most even if painting styles are somewhat subjective.

On the other end of the spectrum, somebody who has an eating disorder might not think that it is a disorder. Her behavior seems rational to her. Does that mean that it actually is? Would we really say that her views on healthy eating are just as correct as anyone else's?

It is obvious that people can be wrong about facts. What if a culture's values and practices were based upon misinformation, such as superstition or just plain falsehoods?

If nobody can be wrong then ad hominem attacks, appeals to inappropriate authority, begging the question/circular reasoning, etc., could not be considered better or worse than any other argument, at least when discussing ethics. Everybody's argument would

have to be equal too, because it is likely that in the other person's estimation it is a good argument that he or she is making even if you do not think so.

I acknowledge that there does not seem to be any universally held moral standards (in the strict sense), but I do not believe that this fact implies either form of Ethical Relativism. Cultural Relativists see each culture as being static, monolithic, entirely independent of, and completely uninfluenced by other cultures. All of these assumptions are wrong. Ironically, Cultural Relativists oversimplify and mischaracterize what a culture is.

If we mean by 'culture' a group with at least two members, each culture contains subsets, and/or is itself a subset of other cultures. Cultural Relativists think of cultures as being entirely independent of each other and entirely uniform: everybody in society A completely accepts each and every cultural value and belief of society A, and not the values of any other culture because they are not part of any other culture. It is the same in society B. If there are any changes to the cultural values of A they do not come from contact with B. (And vice versa.) Since A and B purportedly have no overlap, the Cultural Relativist's argument is that members of A cannot escape the values that they were taught in A, so they cannot appropriately assess what the members of B are doing, as they would only be judging members of B based upon the values of their own culture, not the values of B, and that is bound to be unfair. I admit that it may seem that way when you are comparing isolated cultures that are separated by large geographical differences, and/or languages that differ greatly, and/or wide gaps in time period. Cultures that have little contact with one another do not affect each other as much as those with closer ties and a larger overlap of members, but even in cases where there is little to no overlap of members there would still probably be some overlapping values. Even if societies A and C do not overlap in terms of membership they may still influence one another indirectly and have some cultural values in common if both A and C overlap B. A and B affect each other, and B and C affect each other, so A and C could have some shared values.

Most people are simultaneously a member of several overlapping cultures. We are influenced and indoctrinated with cultural norms from the geographical location that we are in, from the race that we are a part of, our religion (or by associations with those who are not religious), our gender, the political party that we affiliate with and the sources of information that we choose, etc. Less formally, we also have friends and associates who have shared interests in hobbies and recreation, a particular work culture that we are part of, depending on the job that we have, and so forth. Friends can have a lot of influence as well, especially in adolescence. People even start to use the same words and phrases when they are around each other a lot. And, of course, our parents and the values that they instill in us while growing up are a huge influence. For each person it is like a melting pot of values that come from all of these different sources, as well as, in some cases, the individual's own original ideas.

Large cultures are typically composed of thousands of subcultures; each one influences the culture at least a little bit, and often they have some influence on other subcultures,

especially those that are closest to them. The superculture also influences each subculture within it. Although there are shared values, which is what make it a culture to begin with, there is often much disagreement over some matters and oftentimes a fight for control and influence amongst the various factions regarding what the values of the culture should be, and its future course.

I have noticed a pattern that as a religion gets bigger and after its founder has died it seems almost inevitable that it will branch off into multiple sects and even subsects as successors and would be successors emphasize different teachings and want to go in different directions. Someone who is unhappy with the country that he or she belongs to cannot so easily just start a new one or a particular variation of it. Usually if you declare your political independence you have to fight a war in order to really get it, and if unsuccessful you end up either dead or in prison. With religions it is easier to break away, so they tend to branch off more.

Here is the most important point that I want to make in this essay: All of humanity is a culture, the different cultures around the world are just subcultures of that one. If we acknowledge this then by the Cultural Relativist's own reasoning he would have to say that a moral practice is wrong if it violates the world culture's norms.

Relativists of both types are essentially denying that there is a world culture because they say that there are no universally held moral values. But universality is an unreasonable standard. There are no universally held moral values in the United States either (or any other country) because it only takes finding one person who disagrees for it to not be universal. If child molesters within the United States don't believe that molesting children is wrong then you would not be able to say that it is a universal norm; if Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer do not believe that killing someone is wrong then technically that would not be a 'universal' moral value within the country. But of course we do not think that just because somebody in the U.S. disagrees with it that the U.S. culture is in no position to judge them and cannot enforce its rules. In fact, Cultural Relativists say that individuals are doing something morally wrong if they do not follow the ethical standards of the culture that they are part of.

There is not even universal agreement about things that are widely considered to be facts. According to one poll that I heard about on the radio two percent of the population believes that the earth is flat. If we do not even have universal agreement on something like that, which is a factual question not a values question, then how could there be universal agreement on anything?

We do not require universal agreement on scientific views, such as Darwin's Theory of Evolution. Why is there an assumption that there must be 100% agreement on ethics or it is all completely arbitrary and no one's opinion (or a particular culture's viewpoint) is any better than any other?

Even genocide, which seems like the most obvious case of something that is completely indefensible, would not be universally condemned because surely the people that are

doing it would have some way of justifying it and would not believe that they were doing anything morally wrong. But those who are being annihilated surely would think that it is wrong, and nearly all of the people in other cultures across the world would agree with them. Though the latter is a minority view within the culture, there would likely be more people that have that opinion in total.

Even though there are no universally held moral values there are clearly some widely held values that most people in most cultures believe in. Widespread approval does not make something true or false as a matter of fact, but it could be a broadly held moral sentiment and to argue against Cultural Relativism that is all that is needed. If the vast majority of people within a culture have that sentiment that is enough for it to be considered a cultural value. That is true for the world culture just like it is for other cultures.

Mary Midgley wrote a very good essay about Cultural Relativism called 'Trying Out One's New Sword'. The title comes from an example that Midgley used in the essay. She says that there is a verb in Japanese which means 'to try out one's new sword on a chance wayfarer' or literally 'crossroads-cut'. To make sure that he was ready for battle, a samurai wanted a sword that could slice all the way through a person in a single blow, from shoulder to the opposite flank. If he did not perform well in combat it could injure his honor, offend his ancestors, and let down his emperor. (In Japanese culture they took that very seriously; it was not uncommon for people to commit suicide in a very gruesome way if they had brought dishonor upon themselves or their family.) So test subjects were needed to ensure that the sword was ready for war.

What do you think of this cultural practice? Personally, I think it is reprehensible. It is capricious and unnecessary and incredibly unjust. Even if they had executed convicted criminals this way it would have been better than arbitrarily killing a random stranger that did nothing wrong just to test out the sword. But is a person that is from the United States in the year 2021 in a position to make a moral judgement about it? The Cultural Relativist would say that my judgement is based upon the values that I have learned in my own culture and that I really do not understand their culture well enough to pass judgement.

Midgley says that some people would defend the practice based upon the concept of consent: 'It is suggested that sudden bisection is quite in order, provided that it takes place between consenting adults.' I have found this to be correct: when I talk about it with people usually somebody will bring that up. But as she points out, the necessity of obtaining consent is a thoroughly modern Western idea. It is quite unlikely that such a thought would have even occurred to a samurai, or to a peasant traveler. I am also not convinced that it would make it morally okay even if the peasant did consent. Some victims of human sacrifice may be so thoroughly indoctrinated that they would give consent but I would still say that human sacrifice is an abominable practice. Another problem that I have with the practice is that it seems to show a shocking disregard for the sanctity of human life. But the Cultural Relativist would probably point out that this was a feature of the time period, both in Japan and elsewhere. The modern ideas about

equality didn't exist then. It would have been somewhat similar in Europe. A knight would have considered the life of a fellow knight or a member of the nobility to have worth, but there would have been little regard for the life of a serf. But even if that is true, would that really justify it? If soldiers of that time period considered the lives of peasants to have little value does it really follow that they were correct in that judgement?

As Midgley points out, what is really going on here is that the critic feels that my judgement is too hasty and perhaps ill-informed. Maybe I just don't understand that culture well enough and I need to learn more about it in order to put the practice into context and make a more accurate judgement. That could be true. But the conclusion should not be that I cannot make any moral judgement at all, it is that I need to make a better more informed moral judgement. I can accept that critique if it is accurate. Perhaps my initial judgement was too hasty and I need to not jump to conclusions before I know all the facts. But that is a very different claim than the one that the Relativist is making.

Let's think of a related scenario. Imagine that a gang member had just stolen a gun out of a car and wanted to try it out.² He and his buddies drove around the neighborhood and happened to find a woman walking down the street with her four-year-old daughter and he opened fire and killed both of them while the other gang members laughed. Would a Cultural Relativist think that this was immoral behavior and that he should be legally punished? I am sure that she would because it goes against our society's laws and cultural standards. A Cultural Relativist would view this situation differently than the one involving the samurai because the gang member is part of our culture, and in our culture such actions are not allowed. But the problem with that is that the gang member did not violate the ethical standards of his subculture. The members of his gang approved of what he did. He did not violate their cultural norms. So can someone who is outside of their subculture judge him morally and punish him legally when he did not violate his own group's ethical standards? Most of us think that we can because the gang members represent a very small segment of the total population here in the United States, or even a smaller community within it such as the city of St Louis. The vast majority of us feel that the gang members are wrong about this, and we believe that it is appropriate to punish him in part to try to change his moral outlook, and that of the group, so that it is in conformity with the larger culture's moral standards. The culture has to be able to indoctrinate and enforce its norms or it will not last.

If a culture has the right to govern, correct, and morally judge the actions of individuals and subcultures within it, then why wouldn't the world community have the same right? Cultural Relativists treat each culture as though it is entirely separate from the others but in reality each culture is a subset of the world culture and certain things are unacceptable behavior in the world culture, such as slavery, torture, rape, and genocide.

² By the way, just as an aside, most crimes involving firearms are committed with stolen guns that cannot be traced back to the criminal because he would have to be a complete idiot to use one that is registered to him.

If our neighbor is abusing his children do we think ‘Well, it is his house, it is not my place to judge’ or do we think that the children need to be protected? I think it should be the latter. If we think that about our neighbor then why not about people in neighboring cultures?

Albert Carr wrote an essay called ‘Is Business Bluffing Ethical?’ in which he argued that the business community has its own set of moral standards which are separate from the moral standards of society as a whole, which he referred to as ‘Christian morality’. He compared business to poker, a card game in which ‘bluffing’ is part of the game. In other contexts lying is morally wrong, but in poker it is not considered wrong because all of the players realize that it is just part of the game.

There are some issues that I have with Carr’s thesis. He reports that some of the businessmen that he knew personally also had some problems with it. For one thing, some of the examples that Carr used of what the business community supposedly finds acceptable are things that I do not think many members of that community really would find acceptable, such as lying about one’s age on a resume to appear younger. Perhaps this was not the case back then, but today that would require also lying about when you graduated from high school and college and other aspects of your personal life as well. To really get away with it you might have to forge some documents. Many people do exaggerate or try to sell themselves a little bit on their resume and in job interviews, but if it is an outright lie that could cost someone the job. That is not really acceptable behavior, even in the business community. Carr also mentioned the behavior of CEOs (most likely in the auto industry but he does not say for sure) that tried to convince everyone that they were adopting new regulations and safety protocols because they genuinely wanted to keep people safe when in reality it was just cheap talk and the true reason was that they wanted to keep the government from stepping in to regulate them. He mentioned how the insurance industry would try to lowball claims estimates and drag out the claims process as long as possible because they have far greater resources than the individual suing them and they know that it would usually be to their advantage to wait. He said that they also used flawed actuarial tables that skewed to their advantage. There were many more examples of morally questionable business practices.

I don’t think that Carr made this connection himself, but he is basically arguing for Cultural Relativism and making the claim that the business community is a separate culture from the rest of society, which, he claims, espouses ‘Christian morality’.³ He wants to say that the ethical norms of the business community are different than the norms of society as a whole, so, he argues, we should not judge those who are part of the

³ I assume by ‘Christian morality’ he meant treating others how you would want to be treated (golden rule), and such principles as no lying, no stealing, etc. These religious traditions created widely held ethical norms and values in society even for people who were not strong believers. Carr even had a section titled: ‘Discard the Golden Rule’. That comes from an anonymous (of course) business leader claiming that one cannot be expected to follow the golden rule in business.

business community by the standards of 'Christian morality', we should only judge them by the standards of their own community.

The main way that Carr goes wrong, in my view, is that the business community is not an entirely separate culture, it is a subculture. Carr wrote this in the 1960s, and at that time (as well as today) there would have been many who were part of the business community who also would have considered themselves to be believers in Judaism or Christianity - in other words they professed to believe in the Ten Commandments and the moral teachings of their religion. That means that these business people were part of both cultures, as well as other overlapping cultures. Even if they were not very religious those religions helped to create well-established moral standards for society as a whole. Even if the business subculture finds certain behavior acceptable - deceptive advertising for instance - the rest of society does not. Business people know that, which is why they usually try to hide what they are doing and why they sometimes get into trouble if they are caught. (It is telling that Carr felt like he needed to keep the quotes that he used anonymous. If these business people could not express their views openly without fearing the consequences that tells you how the larger culture felt about what they were saying and doing.) Some in the business community would not think that these things are immoral (or they just wouldn't care) but people in other parts of society do, perhaps because they and/or people that they care about are being harmed by it. It is no wonder that so many people outside the business community hate them, especially Wall Street and big corporations. I think a big reason that socialism is appealing to many people is because of the abuses and immoral behavior of the business community. (There are exceptions. Some people in the business world are quite ethical. Unfortunately they seem to be vastly outnumbered.)

It is a little shocking to see the raw unvarnished truth about how some of these people really think, but it is not like Carr told me anything that I did not already know about the business world; what angers me are his bullshit attempts to justify it. Egoism has never been nor will it ever be ethical.

Unfortunately the business subculture is quite powerful in our society. It is much more difficult to hold a corporate CEO responsible for his actions than someone like the gang member that I mentioned earlier because business leaders have more political connections and they can afford far better legal representation so it is hard for the rest of society to punish them. But we need to stay vigilant and keep trying because otherwise there would be no disincentive to restrain their behavior and they would harm even more people.

Now on to a more general question: If we think that it is sometimes appropriate to judge what is going on in a different culture, and perhaps even to intervene, when should there be tolerance and when should there be intervention?

I think we should usually be tolerant of cultural practices and beliefs (after all, tolerance itself is a core value of the world culture) but not if that culture is violating the core values of the world culture, such as a serious violation of human rights. There is some

safety in the fact that you would usually need to have a broad consensus that a culture's practice is wrong in order to have intervention. Force should only be used to prevent serious harm, and only as a last resort.

Individuals and subcultures should also be allowed to try to change the culture's values and beliefs if they feel that they are being treated unfairly, although in practice that could be difficult to do. It usually takes time and a lot of effort and personal sacrifice, but examples such as the Civil Rights Movement, Gay Rights Movement, and Gandhi's work to abolish India's Caste System and peacefully break away from the British Empire show that it is at least possible for an individual or a small group to bring about change.⁴

The reason that change is possible is because cultures are dynamic; they constantly evolve as their membership fluctuates and changes. It is reciprocal, the culture influences the individual, and the individual influences the culture. Some individuals have more influence than others, but everybody influences it to some extent.

It is a bit of a double-edged sword: Because cultures are dynamic we must fight a constant battle to keep what is good, but the fact that they are dynamic can also give one hope that what is bad in a toxic culture can be changed.

⁴ It should be noted that a Cultural Relativist would have no reason to be a social activist. If Frederick Douglass or other abolitionists had been (consistent) Relativists they would not have tried to end slavery, they would have just accepted that it is part of the culture of the South. (Ditto for Martin Luther King and his followers protesting segregation.) If each culture's beliefs and practices are no better or worse than any other then there would be no sense in attempting to change any cultural practice. Trying to change a law or moral custom implies that you think that the culture is wrong on that issue.