

Cultural Relativism

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Cultural relativism is not so much a single position as a name shared by several related positions, many of which have importance not only in the social sciences (especially anthropology) but in law and philosophy. These positions share, firstly, an essential emphasis on *culture*—for instance, a reference to cultural norms as fundamental to the origin, understanding, or truth of beliefs—often in opposition to one or more forms of *universalism*, e.g., the view that some moral principles are valid for all cultures. They also share a direct or remote opposition to *ethnocentrism*, the uncritical belief in the superiority of one’s own culture. Although these positions have antecedents in the eighteenth century and even in ancient times, they gained most of their currency in the twentieth century. They did so in reaction to the ethnocentrism of much nineteenth-century social science—for instance, to the assumption that all cultures are progressing along the same path, with some cultures, notably European ones, leading the others (Hatch 1983). The most prominent cultural relativists are the sociologist William Graham Sumner (1840–1910) and the anthropologists Franz Boas (1858–1942), Ruth Benedict (1887–1948), and Melville Herskovits (1895–1963). Collectively their works contain, explicitly or implicitly, each of the major positions sharing the name “cultural relativism.”

Two of those positions, both of them standard in contemporary social science, we might call *methodological neutralism* and *methodological contextualism*. Methodological neutralism asserts that to understand other cultures, social scientists must suppress (as much as possible) their own moral convictions and immediate moral reactions when studying those cultures. Methodological contextualism asserts that every custom, belief, or action must be studied in the context of the history and traditions, problems and opportunities, and total body of customs of the culture in which it is found; otherwise, we can gain little insight into other cultures. Although not identical, methodological neutralism and methodological contextualism are closely related: both counteract ethnocentric biases that can distort observation and inference.

A further thesis called cultural relativism is the ethical theory found or suggested in Sumner (1906), Benedict (1934a, 1934b), and Herskovits (1973). This theory opposes moral skepticism on the one hand; moral universalism on the other. It opposes moral skepticism by assuming that some things are genuinely right or wrong—or, as we might put it, that some statements of the form “X is morally right (wrong, good, etc.)” are genuinely true or valid. It opposes moral universalism by asserting that what is genuinely right or wrong varies from one culture to the next. More precisely, no moral principle, not even a very general one (e.g., the Golden Rule) is *universally* true or valid (except, perhaps, by coincidence). Rather, whatever truth or validity a moral principle may have is confined to one or a few cultures, ruling out any transcultural moral standpoint. This is because right and wrong are ultimately a function of cultural norms.

The theory just described—call it *moral* cultural relativism—must not be confused with *descriptive* cultural relativism, the view that because moral systems and beliefs are primarily the offspring of culture, they vary radically from one culture to another (Benedict 1934b, 45). This position is descriptive rather than normative; it concerns what is *believed* or *accepted* about right and wrong, not what is *actually* right or wrong. It thus differs from moral cultural relativism, even if commonly used (perhaps along with other premises, e.g., that moral truths reduce to facts about what is accepted as right or wrong) in defense of that theory.

The key idea of moral cultural relativism—that moral truths are culture-bound—is sometimes extended to truths in general, and even to our most fundamental concepts (Herskovits 1973, 49–61). This yields additional views that take the name “cultural relativism”—for example, the view that every truth is confined to just one of many incommensurable frameworks of belief, each framework being the product of a particular culture.

Still another thing often called cultural relativism is the injunction that everyone ought to be tolerant of other cultures. Contrary to what is sometimes thought, this thesis does not follow from any of the other views so far discussed. For instance, from the view that no moral principle is universally valid it clearly cannot follow that one such principle, the principle of tolerance, is universally valid. Still, it might be argued that those who accept some of the positions here discussed are more likely than others to be tolerant of other cultures (Benedict 1934b, 37, 278).

The positions described here are the main ones commonly called cultural relativism. Additionally, that label often denotes a composite of two or more of these positions. Although logically distinct, these positions are often conflated—or at least inadequately distinguished. This often confuses students, who find one form of relativism (e.g., a composite of methodological neutralism and methodological contextualism) endorsed in their anthropology class, another form (moral cultural relativism) critiqued in their philosophy class, the two theses insufficiently distinguished and sharing the same name.

Cultural relativism, especially moral cultural relativism, has been vigorously debated in the social sciences, in philosophy, and in fields concerning international human rights (Hatch 1983; Tilley 2000; Donnelly 2013). This stems partly from possible, disturbing implications of moral cultural relativism. If moral truths are culture-bound, then perhaps a culture the norms of which permit, say, genocide is acting morally in committing that deed. Similarly, if moral truths about human rights are tied to particular cultures, then perhaps some cultures are justified in recognizing no such rights.

As these examples show, although cultural relativism grew up in a spirit of tolerance, some forms of it may implicitly clash with that spirit. For this reason and others, cultural relativism continues to stimulate research and debate.

SEE ALSO: Boas, Franz; Ethnocentrism; Eurocentrism; Sumner, William Graham

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