

“Thought becomes clear when it is spoken.”

Abstraction

What is cultural relativism? First, **relativism** says “what is true for you, is true for you, and what is true for me, is true for me. Analogously, **cultural relativism** would say that, “what you believe, value, or practice depends on your culture while what I believe, value, and practice depends on my culture.” In other words, cultural relativism is the idea that a person’s belief, values, and practices should be understood based on that person’s own culture, rather than be judged against the criteria of another.

Example: *Telling a friend not to eat meat on Friday despite not being Catholic.*

In this concept, morality vary from culture to culture. Meaning, all culture is equally valid and there is no single culture that we can consider as “best”. This is based on the idea that there is no ultimate standard for good and evil, so every judgement about right and wrong is a product of society.

Cultural Relativism vs. Cultural Perspective

However, what the cultural relativist fails to see is the difference between **cultural perspective** and **cultural relativism**. A perspective is a standpoint or viewpoint of something. For instance, you bought a house. In appreciating your newly bought house, you not only judge its exterior, but also the interior. Meaning, you never judge the design based on only one perspective. In trying to understand one’s culture, having a perspective of one’s culture, is needed to understand people.

The problem with moving from cultural perspective to cultural relativism is the erosion of reason that it causes. Rather than simply saying, “we need to understand the morals of other cultures,” it says, “we cannot judge the morals of other cultures,” regardless of the reasons of their actions. It becomes impossible to argue that anything a culture does is right or wrong.

Strengths of Cultural Relativism

1. Cultural relativism helps avoid moral dictatorship

Dictators control everything and do not respect the opinions or ideas of others. Cultural relativism respects diversity and the plurality of rich cultural and historical traditions. The behaviors and moral standards of other cultures are not always in agreement with one’s own. The question is whether it is right to impose moral standards applicable to all people on the moral dilemmas of people with different cultural backgrounds.

2. Cultural relativism respects the beliefs of different cultures

Cultural relativism does not insult or question the ability of other cultures to make intelligent and sound moral judgements. Moral norms or standards of other cultures have long been respected and recognized by their own authorities, elders, and members. There is no objective, scientific method or valid system to judge and criticize the moral practices of other cultures as superior or inferior

3. Cultural relativism promotes unity and harmony among cultures

Cultural relativism counters the attitude of intolerance, arrogance, and dominance. These behaviors are the source of endless misunderstanding, conflict, and hostility within and among cultures. Cultural relativism promotes deeper understanding and respect which is the key to better relationships among diverse cultures.

Problems of Cultural Relativism

1. Tolerance and acceptance of social injustices and inhumane activities

Though it has its strengths, cultural relativism also has negative implications. It may make people turn a blind eye to the plight of the marginalized in the name of cultural plurality. There are many cases in the long-held cultural traditions and practices that cause the suffering and abuse of individuals. However, these traditions and practices are passed off as existing in a particular cultural context that not everyone understands. A rational person will assert that such acts should not continue, yet relativism tends to accept, permit, and tolerate them because of cultural diversity.

2. Rejection of higher universal or common moral standards

Cultural relativism reduces morality to customs, traditions, and cultural preferences. The idea of good or bad, of wrong and right depends on the accepted practices in one's culture. Individuals and groups cannot question the legitimacy or validity of cultural practices simply because it is approved by the society. However, is it possible to critically evaluate and criticize the quality, essence, and meaning of morality if objectivity is disregarded? Moral progress cannot be achieved if there are no universal moral standards with which to judge various cultural preferences and practices.

3. Vulnerability to racial discrimination

Cultural relativism rejects a universal sense of humanity by claiming that each culture is unique and different. The truth is, despite cultural differences, all humans share the same traits as human species. Generally, all human beings are similar to one another and it is possible to understand and agree on common moral standards. The idea that there are unique and different cultures could also lead to the thinking that one's culture is superior to others or that others can be disparaged and controlled because they lack uniqueness, and are thus considered inferior.