

## CULTURAL RELATIVISM

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### Summary

Cultural relativism is a cluster of more specific doctrines that will be distinguished from one another in this article. Descriptive cultural relativism holds that widespread and fundamental cultural differences exist over different groups. Epistemological cultural relativism holds that these differences cannot be adjudicated so that some beliefs turn out to be better or worse in terms of truth or justifiability.

Normative cultural relativism holds that these differences weigh in favor of toleration, noninterference, or at the very least minimal intervention in the affairs of other groups. Defenders of cultural relativism have asserted the different component views against colonialism, exploitation of developing countries, and the encroachments of global capitalism.

Detractors dismiss these views as smokescreens for the oppression of some by others within a group, enervating the willingness to call injustice and the violation of rights by their rightful names. The whole truth is considerably more complex, and much depends on how each doctrine is precisely formulated and defended. This article will assess the arguments bearing on each version of cultural relativism and then the implications for practical policy issues regarding development and intervention into the affairs of other groups with different cultures.

## 1. Introduction

“Culture” has come to mean something like “way of life” of a group, a set of socially transmitted beliefs, norms, and practices that govern the course of social cooperation within the group and the ways its members conceive and live their lives. A culture contains an ethical code: a set of norms for prescribing and evaluating the conduct, attitudes, and characters of its members as being right or wrong, praiseworthy or blameworthy. A culture also includes ways of knowing, characteristic modes of inquiry and justification of beliefs about the nature and operations of the world and human affairs. To say that a culture is socially transmitted means that it is passed on from some members of the group to others and from one generation to the next through various forms of teaching and modeling. Not all members of a group need to share all the beliefs, norms, and practices that go into its culture. Members may simply acknowledge these items as prevalent or widespread through the group.

On one level, cultural relativism is the assertion that important cultural differences exist. This is the descriptive component of cultural relativism. As will be discussed, the truth or falsity of descriptive cultural relativism is not simply a matter of observing differences and then reporting on them. It is a matter of interpreting groups of people and identifying the values and ways of knowing to which they have committed themselves. Some have argued that important consequences ensue from descriptive relativism for the truth or justifiability of different groups’ beliefs and practices. They have concluded that truth or justifiability is relative to groups (i.e. that what is true or justified for one group is not true or justified for another group). This is the epistemological component of cultural relativism. Much of the controversy surrounding the argument for this doctrine centers on the question of whether descriptive relativism, assuming that some version of it is well founded, provides genuine support for epistemological relativism. Finally, some have argued that important ethical consequences ensue from epistemological relativism for how people ought to behave toward other groups who have different values or ways of knowing. They have argued that it is wrong to judge or to intervene in the affairs of these other groups. Some have criticized this normative component of cultural relativism as incoherent.

## 2. Descriptive Cultural Relativism

Descriptive cultural relativism holds that important cultural differences exist. But what are “important” differences? Typically, what is important gets explained as “fundamental.” Fundamental differences in culture include differences that cannot be explained by saying that they are simply different applications of shared values. Why might there be different applications of what is shared? Values are applied by way of beliefs about the nature of the situation at hand. Groups may apply shared values differently because their beliefs about their situations differ.

Consider the example of the tribe in Hudson Bay of North America that once had the practice in which children ritually killed their elderly parents. The European explorers who encountered this tribe reacted with horror and incomprehension. However, the tribe had to make its life in a particularly harsh and unforgiving climate, such that the elderly and infirm will die painful, lingering deaths. Perhaps the tribe’s practice developed in

order to spare the elderly and infirm such deaths. The European explorers belonged to a society that did not have to make its life under harsh conditions. Some argue that no fundamental difference of value exists here and that benevolence toward parents is a value shared by both groups, applied in dramatically different fashion because of the difference in their situations. Or consider a variation of this example. Underlying the practice of killing one's parents in the first group is the belief that killing them at a certain point eases their way into the afterlife, whereas the second group has no such belief. Again, the point is that benevolence might be shared value applied in different ways because of different beliefs the two groups have about their situations.

### **2.1. Autonomy-Oriented versus Community-Oriented Cultures**

Consider a more plausible candidate for fundamental differences in value. There are ways of life associated with the modern industrialized West that centrally value individual rights to liberty and to other goods, where these rights are attributed to individuals on the basis of an ethical worth they have independently of their membership in any community. By contrast, there are ways of life associated with "traditional cultures" that centrally value a shared life of relationships in community, where one's fulfillment as a human being is seen to lie primarily in fulfilling one's responsibilities within a community. There is comparatively little space for the idea that the individual may have ethically legitimate interests that conflict with the interests of the communities to which she belongs.

The intended contrast between autonomy-oriented and community-oriented cultures needs to be drawn carefully. Both kinds of cultures could be said to recognize rights, in a generic sense of "rights," if an individual is recognized as legitimately entitled to claim certain goods or liberties as her entitlement. In a community-oriented culture, for instance, one can be said to possess rights in this generic sense in virtue of a social role one has. A father could be said to have rights to honor and obedience from children. In an autonomy-oriented culture as defined here there is a different kind of basis for individual entitlements. This basis is the assumption of a substantial domain of legitimate personal interests held by the individual that may conflict with the public collective interests of the community. In autonomy-oriented cultures, rights constitute constraints or limits on the extent that the individual's personal interests may be sacrificed for the sake of public or collective goods. It must be stressed that individuals in community-oriented cultures are not without protections against exploitation, since communities themselves are held up to standards of what good relationships are, and good relationships are often conceived in terms of mutual care and respect. The underlying ideal, however, is of human beings in relationship to one another. In community-oriented cultures, it is typically assumed that an individual's most fundamental interests consist in standing in good relationships to others. For the sake of advancing or protecting that ideal, protections for the individual's interests, when these interests conflict with the formation and maintenance of the desired relationships, may have a scope narrower than they have in autonomy-oriented cultures.

Sometimes a fundamental contrast in values takes the subtle form of differences in relative emphasis or priority given to values that the cultures in question share. For example, since community-oriented cultures are generally older than modern autonomy-

oriented cultures, it is not unusual for a culture to have a mixture of autonomy-oriented and community-oriented themes. It also is not usual for one type of theme to be more dominant than the other. The USA is an example of a society with both themes. The democratic political tradition receives autonomy-oriented interpretations (e.g. civil liberties are owed to the individual as an individual and are claimed against the larger society as protections against intrusive measures to advance the public interest). It also receives community-oriented interpretations (e.g. the civil liberties can be conceived as empowering protections enabling the individual to contribute to the governance of her society as an end in itself). Liberties under this interpretation are those among those goods enabling people to be and perform as good citizens. However, the autonomy-oriented themes are more dominant. Japan is a society in which both themes are present and in which the democratic tradition receives both autonomy-oriented and community-oriented traditions, but the latter are dominant.

## **2.2. Attunement versus Prediction and Control**

Fundamental differences can also involve differences in ways of knowing the world: differences in modes of reasoning or justifying belief that cannot be explained away by viewing them as different applications of still other modes of reasoning that are shared. Consider, for example, that many traditional cultures prize a kind of understanding of the world that seems inseparable from the aims of finding the world deeply good and of finding one's proper place in it. One cannot be said to understand the world properly without attaining a kind of wisdom that consists in knowing one's home in the world. The aims of finding the world good and one's home in it guide inquiry in the sense of helping to decide which of several conflicting beliefs are to be conserved and which rejected or revised so as to be consistent with the overall body of belief. This is not to deny that beliefs about the world are judged according to more familiar aims of prediction and control. Rather, these aims coexist with and are balanced with aims concerning attunement with the world (this is not to imply, however, that people who do this conceive of what they are doing in these terms). For example, the Mbuti of Central Africa regard the forest as sacred, the source of their existence, of all goodness. They talk, shout, whisper, and sing to the forest, addressing it as mother or father or both, referring to its goodness and its ability to cure or make good. Yet members of this tribe deploy perfectly well the more familiar forms of causal reasoning in hunting and gathering. Human beings are skilled at compartmentalizing modes of reasoning according to different spheres of life or even from context to context.

Compare traditional cultures in which the aims of attunement have remained dominant with cultures in which attunement as an aim has receded and in which prediction and control have assumed dominance. The reason why such a cultural difference in modes of reasoning might well be fundamental is that it seems to rest on a fundamental difference in value. Traditional cultures express an interest in finding one's home in the world and its attendant satisfactions, just as cultures deeply influenced by modern science and technology express an interest in prediction and control of nature. If some object that there is a truth about how things are, independently of anyone's wish to become attuned to the world, it may be replied that the objection acquires force only if one takes a sole or dominating interest in that kind of truth.

Again, cultural differences may be matters of differences in shading rather than black versus white. A society may contain a mixture of traditional forms of understanding that are predominantly guided by the interest in attunement and modern forms of understanding that are predominantly guided by the interest in prediction and control. This is especially true of societies in fundamental transition, say, between traditional and modern forms of culture, or in modern societies receiving immigrants from traditional cultures. For example, in some traditional cultures an epileptic is understood as a person whose spirit is disturbed or even temporarily taken from the body by other spiritual beings. Such a person is sometimes seen as having special access to the world of these beings. Doctors with training in modern Western medicine will have quite a different view of the epileptic's condition. A family that takes an epileptic to a hospital for treatment may clash quite severely with the staff on the course of appropriate treatment.

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**David B. Wong** is professor of philosophy at Duke University. He was formerly at Brandeis University. He writes primarily in the fields of ethical theory, comparative ethics, and Chinese philosophy. His works include *Moral Relativity* (University of California Press, 1984), “On flourishing and finding one’s identity in community” (*Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 1988), “Coping with moral conflict and ambiguity” (*Ethics*, 1992), “Universalism versus love with distinctions” (*Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 1989), “Is there a distinction between reason and emotion in Mencius?” (*Philosophy East & West*, 1991), and “Xunzi on moral motivation” (*Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and his Critics*, 1996).