

Cultural Relativism

1. What is Cultural Relativism?
2. Is Cultural Relativism true?
3. What can we learn from Cultural Relativism?

Cultural Relativism

What is it?

Rough idea: There is no universal truth in ethics. There are only customary practices specific to various cultures.

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

Cultural Relativism

What is it?

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one societal code better than another.
3. The moral code of our own society has no special status; is merely one among many.
4. There is no “universal truth” in ethics—that is, there are no moral truths that hold for all peoples at all times.
5. 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.
6. 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.

Cultural Relativism

Is it true?

The *Cultural Differences Argument*:

- P1** Different cultures have different moral codes
- C** Therefore, there is no objective “truth” in morality.
Right and wrong are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.

This argument is *not sound*, because it is *not valid*. It is possible that the premise could be true and the conclusion false.

This doesn't prove that the conclusion *is* false. It just shows that the Cultural Difference Argument shouldn't persuade us to believe that the conclusion is true.

There may, however, be some arguments available to show that the conclusion *is* false.

Cultural Relativism

Is it true?

Reductio ad absurdum:

Let's suppose that Cultural Relativism is true. That is, let's suppose that right and wrong are determined entirely by cultural practices.

If we can show that some unacceptable consequences *follow* from this view, then we have some reason for rejecting it as false.

What follows from Cultural Relativism?

Cultural Relativism

Is it true?

Reductio ad absurdum: If CR is true...

- 1) We can no longer say that the customs of other societies are inferior to our own.

There's certainly something attractive about this result.

But what about practices like slavery, or genocide?
Shouldn't we be able to criticize these kinds of practices?

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Is it true?

Reductio ad absurdum: If CR is true...

- 2) To find out if a particular action is right or wrong, we just need to figure out the standards of our society.

How are we supposed to know what “our society” is?

Sometimes we *disagree* with the standards of our society.
If CR is right, we can't criticize *our own* cultural practices.

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Is it true?

Reductio ad absurdum: If CR is true...

3) Moral progress becomes impossible.

We no longer have any way to determine if new standards are better or worse than old standards. For example, we can't say that our society is *better* now that women can vote.

We also severely limit the concept of social reform: If CR is true, then “reformers” can't challenge the ideals of their own societies.

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Is it true?

How much do different cultures *really* disagree?

We need to distinguish between *values* and *beliefs*.

It may turn out that all cultures hold some *values* in common.

Examples:

*The safety of infants and young people

*Truth telling

*Prohibition on murder

Cultural Relativism

Is it true?

“There are some moral rules that all societies will have in common, because those rules are necessary for society to exist.”

Cultural Relativism

What can we learn from it?

1. We should not assume that *all* of our preferences are based on some objective moral standard.
2. It's a good idea to keep an open mind when we encounter practices that disturb us. We need to ask ourselves: Why do I hold the values and beliefs that I hold?