

2. CHAPTER 2: THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM

2.1. How Different Cultures Have Different Moral Codes

The Callatians customarily ate the bodies of their dead fathers. The Greeks practiced cremation and regarded the funeral pyre as the natural and fitting way to dispose of the dead.

Different cultures have different moral codes. What is thought right within one group may be utterly abhorrent to the members of another group, and vice versa. Since the time of Herodotus, enlightened observers have been accustomed to the idea that conceptions of right and wrong differ from culture to culture. If we assume that our ideas of right and wrong will be shared by all peoples at all times, we are merely naive.

2.2. Cultural Relativism

The idea of universal truth in ethics, they say, is a myth. The customs of different societies are all that exist.

The "right" way is the way which the ancestors used and which has been handed down. The notion of right is in the folkways.

2.3. The Cultural Differences Argument

1. Different cultures have different moral codes.
2. Therefore, there is no objective "truth" in morality. Right and wrong are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.

The fundamental mistake in the Cultural Differences argument is that it intends to derive a substantive conclusion about a subject from the mere fact that people disagree about it.

2.4. The Consequences of Taking Cultural Relativism Seriously

Suppose a society was violently anti-Semitic and its leaders set out to destroy the Jews. Cultural relativism would preclude us from saying that this practice is wrong.

Cultural relativism would not only forbid us from criticizing the codes of other societies; it would stop us from criticizing our own.

2.5. Why There Is Less Disagreement Than It Seems

Many factors work together to produce the customs of a society. We cannot conclude, then, merely because customs differ, but there is a disagreement about *values*.

Among the Eskimos, infanticide does not signal a fundamentally different attitude toward children. Instead, is a recognition that drastic measures are sometimes needed to insure the family's survival. The Eskimos values are not all that different from our values. It is only that life forces upon them choices that we do not have to make.

2.6. How All Cultures Have Some Values in Common

In any complex society there must be a presumption in favor of truthfulness.
The prohibition of murder is a necessary feature of all societies.
There are some of moral rules that all societies will have in common, because those rules are necessary for society to exist.

2.7. Judging a Cultural Practice to be Immoral

Excision is a permanently disfiguring procedure that is sometimes called "female circumcision", or "gentle mutilation".

What standard might we most reasonably use to determine whether this practice is morally acceptable or not? We may ask whether the practice promotes or hinders the welfare of the people whose lives are affected by it. This looks like just the sort of independent moral standard that cultural relativism says cannot exist. It is a single standard that may be brought to bear in judging the practices of any culture, at any time, including our own.

People are hesitant to judge the morality of other cultures because people feel that they should be tolerant of other cultures.

2.8. What Can be Learned from Cultural Relativism

Cultural Relativism warns us, quite rightly, about the danger of assuming that all our preferences are based on some absolute rational standard. They are not.

Many (but not all) of our practices are merely peculiar to our society, and it is easy to lose sight of that fact.

Herodotus:

For if anyone, no matter who, were given the opportunity of choosing from amongst all the nations of the world the set of beliefs which he thought best, he would inevitably, after careful consideration of their relative merits, choose that of his own country. Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best.