

Philosophical Analysis of the Concept of Cultural Relativism

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Abstract

New findings of Social Anthropologists also have immensely contributed for contemporary concept of relativism. They have employed new scientific research methods to gather data related to the different cultures in many parts of the world. Ethnographic data gathered by them are often cited to establish that there are substantial differences in the beliefs, practice, and worldviews of different cultures. This insight leads to substantiate the concept of cultural relativism in the intellectual circles. There is a huge debate within the philosophy of culture that culture is a relative to the society or group of the people in particular geographical area or culture is an absolute concept in all society. This debate makes a controversial argument within the cultural anthropology as well. This research paper will investigate the philosophical ideology behind the concept of cultural relativism. This is an attempt to make philosophical clarification an understanding of cultural relativism within the modern philosophy and cultural anthropological thoughts. The methodology of this study will be analysis of different ideology of cultural relativism; therefore, this involves comparison and contextual analysis. It is concluded that the development of social anthropology has made significant changes within the field of relativism in contemporary thought. The concept of cultural relativism, it has to be emphasized, has made substantial impression in the compass of relativism.

Key words: Cultural Relativism, Philosophy of Culture, Morality, Diversity.

Introduction

Concept of relativism was entering the many areas in human intellectual history. Within the philosophy of culture and philosophy of cultural anthropologists also develop their argument to identify and clarify the concept of culture and its relativity to the society. In this manner, cultural relativism is the ability to understand a culture on its own terms and not to make judgments using the standards of one's own culture. The goal of this

promotes understanding of cultural practices that are not typically part of one's own culture, using the perspective of cultural relativism leads to the view that no one culture is superior to another culture when compared to systems of morality, law, and politics, etc. It is a concept that cultural norms and values derive their meaning within a specific social context. This is also based on the idea that there is no absolute standard of good or evil;

therefore, every decision and judgment of what is right and wrong is individually decided in each society. The concept of cultural relativism also means that any opinion on ethics is subject to the perspective of each person within their particular culture. The multifaceted and often unclear idea of cultural relativism was formulated most radically in the writings of Boas' students, particularly Melville Herskovits, who emphasised "the validity of every set of norms for the people whose lives are guided by them"¹, and formulated the most cited definition of cultural relativism: "Judgements are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation."² Cultural relativism was met with immediate criticism. The most common worry was that it would lead to moral nihilism. After Herskovits, it is hard to fine anyone who endorsed a full-blown form of it. For instance, Clifford Geertz, in his interpretivist reading of cultural relativism, defends it to a certain degree, but also notes its shortcomings: "The truth of the doctrine of cultural relativism is that we can never apprehend another people's or another period's imagination neatly, as though it were our own. The falsity of it is that we can therefore never genuinely apprehend it at all."³ This paper following discuss the debate on cultural absolutism and cultural relativism, as well this will explore how the cultural relativism develop within the philosophy of culture and cultural anthropological thoughts.

An Argument on Cultural Absolutism and Relativism

Cultural absolutism maintains that an action is moral or immoral by an absolutely right standard. The fundamental

difference between a moral act and an immoral act is that the former meets the absolutely right standard whereas the latter does not. An absolutely right standard transcends all cultures in the world, so an action might be right even if all the cultures disapprove of it, and it might be wrong even if all the cultures approve of it. Moreover, one culture might be considered to be morally better than another, depending on whether or not its moral standards adhere more closely to the absolutely right standard than those of its competitor. For example, a beef-eating culture would be morally superior to a beef-abstaining culture if the former were closer to the absolutely right standard than the latter.

In contrast, cultural relativism holds that a moral agent's behaviour is to be evaluated in reference to a culture. If his culture accepts it, it is moral. If his culture rejects it, it is immoral. For example, it is moral to eat beef in relation to a beef-eating culture, but wrong in relation to a beef-abstaining culture. Thus, cultural approval is what makes an act right, and cultural disapproval is what makes an act wrong: "Cultural relativism, then, is the doctrine that what makes an action right is that it's approved by one's culture."⁴ "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."⁵

Cultural relativism also asserts that it is impossible to morally adjudicate between different cultures. A culture would be better than another if it were closer to the absolutely right standard than the other were, ut there is no such thing as an absolutely right standard, so no culture can be better than another:

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“There is no single true morality. There are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others”⁶ . “There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society’s code as better than another’s.”⁷

Development in Social Anthropology and Relativism

Relativism in philosophy of anthropology cover two quite different perspectives on its topic. On the one hand, it deal with arguments presented by philosophers, and on the other, with ideas and practices developed by anthropologists. Sometimes the two perspectives complement each other. Both anthropologists and philosophers have taken part in some of the same debates about relativism; philosophers' arguments have influenced anthropological theory and ethnographic research practices; and ideas developed in anthropology have inspired philosophical discussions.

Those philosophical discussion were based on the tradition of analytic philosophy, and on ideas and practices developed in social and cultural anthropology. For the past few decades, however, connections between anthropological theory and philosophy have largely happened through continental thinkers.

Popular conceptions of anthropology often take cultural relativism to be its sine qua non. But though it is still a necessary part of any undergraduate anthropology curriculum, in the writings of contemporary anthropologists it is hard to find the thoroughgoing cultural relativism endorsed in the American cultural anthropology in the 1940s and 50s. Cultural relativism became an important idea in anthropology in a specific social and intellectual context. It was developed

as an important part of the criticism directed against the evolutionary views of nineteenth-century anthropologists such as James Frazer and Edward Tylor. Franz Boas and his students, following similar ideas presented in Europe, rejected as ethnocentric and racist the way in which the evolutionists classified cultures on a scale ranging from primitive to modern. According to these critics, anthropologists should be wary of using their own cultural norms when evaluating the cultures they study. In other words, from the well-documented relativity of e.g. moral judgements and epistemic practices, they proceeded to the relativistic claim that anthropologists could or should not move beyond this relativity. Cultural relativism is defined by one of its strongest proponents, the anthropologist M.J.Herskovits, as:

[...] an approach to the question of the nature and role of value in culture. It represents a scientific, inductive attack on an age-old philosophical problem, using fresh cross-cultural data hitherto not available to scholars, gained from the study of the underlying value-systems of societies having the most diverse customs. The principle of cultural relativism, briefly stated, is as follows: Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation[...] Even the fact of the physical world is discerned through the enculturative screen, so that the perception of time, distance, weight, size, and other ‘realities’ is mediated by the conventions of any given group.⁸ The area of cultural relativism is not confined to modern thought. It has roots in the history of philosophy. But within the confines of social anthropology anthropologist Franz Boas is believed to be the founder of

cultural relativism. Boas believed the evolutionary account to be ethnocentric and not conducive to fruitful understanding of individual cultures. He also argued against racial explanations of cultural differences. Instead, the explanation of our patterns of action and thought is to be found in the culture to which we belong and not our nature or biological make-up. Our personality traits, our habits and manners are all due to a particular cultural background. Even race, age and sex are cultural constructs. According to Boas, 'the data of ethnology prove that not only our knowledge but also our emotions are the result of the form of our social life and of the history of the people to whom we belong'.⁹ Within the history of Anthropology it is believed that Boas is the key figure who formulated the cultural relativism in anthropology. In the development of the theory of cultural relativism, Herskovits' identification of distinctions between descriptive, prescriptive, and philosophical cultural relativism has added new light.¹⁰ Descriptive cultural relativism is an empirical thesis implying that different societies have different systems of belief and value; and its claims are supported by observation of cultural diversity. Herskovits, for instance, says: [...] the principle of cultural relativism derives from a vast array of factual data gained from the application of techniques in field study that have permitted us to penetrate the underlying value-systems of societies having diverse customs.¹¹ These views were accepted by the Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn and they have stated that 'Sincere comparison of cultures leads quickly to recognition of their 'relativity.'¹² Gathering ethnographic data are cited not only as

evidence for the diversity of human belief or the empirical doctrine of descriptive cultural relativism, but also as supporting evidence for the adoption of prescriptive cultural relativism. Prescriptive cultural relativism enjoins the practicing anthropologist to refrain from taking judgmental positions towards the people under study, in order to attain a greater degree of objectivity. This is a methodological principle to be used in contexts of anthropological fieldwork. In this, the least ideological or doctrinaire form of relativism, methodological cultural relativism is simply 'a commitment by the anthropologists to suspending moral judgment until an attempt can be made to understand another culture's beliefs and practices in their full cultural, material, and historical contexts'¹³. The philosophical doctrine of cultural relativism presupposes the truth of descriptive relativism; it is based on the assumption that there is fundamental, i.e., irresolvable, differences in ethical and cognitive belief-systems across cultures. The differences between cultures, it is argued, are not simply superficial disagreements on where the facts lie but are indicative of a fundamental divide between Western and non-Western thinking about values, reason, logic, and the nature of rationality itself. Cultural relativism introduced by social anthropologists has facilitated diffusion of relativism in different fields of contemporary thinking. Increased interest in recognizing the importance of the study of different languages and consequential discovery of the philological links between them convinced the linguistic relativity of the different cultures. Benjamin Whorf's work is considered as the locus classicus of the approach known as 'linguistic relativity'.

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Whorf believed that the most direct and fruitful way of understanding human thinking is through the study of language, for such study would show that the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of patterns of which he is not conscious of. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systematization of his own language - shown readily enough by a candid comparison and contrasts with other languages, especially those of a different linguistic family.¹⁴ According to Whorf, different grammars can shape our process of forming ideas about the world to varying degrees of difference. For, instance according to Whorf, the Hopi articulate, and hence perceive, the world in terms of events rather than objects, and see time not in terms of duration as English speakers do, but as relation between events. In the Hopi language, Whorf tells us, 'lightning', 'wave', 'flame', 'meteor', 'puff of smoke', 'pulsation' are all verbs, events of necessarily brief duration, and cannot be anything but verbs. He also claims that the Hopi, unlike speakers on Indo-European languages, describe the universe without recourse to dimensional time. Whorf thus propose 'a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated'¹⁵. This principle of linguistic relativity, which receives its name and inspiration from Einstein's work, leads to the conclusion that user of radically different languages lives in different worlds.

There, however, are several empirical and conceptual problems raised in relation to the arguments presented in favor of cultural relativism. One such issue is related to the possibility of casting doubts

concerning the reliability and the interpretation of the data gathered by social anthropologies. Moreover, dissenting voices within anthropology itself have argued that cultural relativists, in their eagerness to show the exoticism or - to use more fashionable terminology - the 'otherness' of the subject of their study, have exaggerated the differences between cultures and societies and have underestimated the extent of commonality that exists at both biological and social level between all human beings. For instance, Donald E. Brown (1991), based on his extensive study of ethnographic data gathered by anthropologists, has argued that a large number of cultural values and practices are common to societies studied by anthropologists.

Conclusion

It is concluded that the development of social anthropology has made significant changes within the field of relativism in contemporary thought. The concept of cultural relativism, it has to be emphasized, has made substantial impression in the compass of relativism. The concept of cultural relativism also means that any opinion on ethics is subject to the perspective of each person within their particular culture. Overall, there is no right or wrong ethical system. In a holistic understanding of the term cultural relativism, it tries to counter ethnocentrism by promoting the understanding of cultural practices that are unfamiliar to other cultures such as eating insects, genocides or genital cutting.

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