Relativity Reconsidered:
How Can We Respect Other Cultural Practices and Remain True To Our Core Principles?

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Abstract

A reluctance to judge or intervene in the beliefs and behaviours of cultures other than our own has been a fundamental principle of the multicultural conversation of our times. Increasingly, however, this culturally relativist attitude has come under pressure from the challenges posed by immigration, globalisation, and fundamentalism (both political and religious). How are people to respect or respond to such controversial practices as child marriage, female circumcision, animal cruelty, caste discrimination, and other forms of perceived social injustice?

Following a brief outline of the history and development of the idea of cultural relativity, from Boas

through Benedict and Mead to the present day, an analysis of the most prevalent and contentious contemporary challenges to this principle will be offered, together with a wealth of examples and case studies. Three possible approaches to resolving these problems will then be presented and described, and their applicability in various cases will be considered.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, cultural relativity, tolerance

One of the most influential sociopolitical trends over the last half-century has been that of multiculturalism, at the heart of which lies the philosophical principle of cultural relativity. In its simplest form, this proposition asserts that the perception of any observer from outside a cultural system will inevitably be influenced by his or her own background, resulting in a limited, ethnocentric perspective on the situation. Accordingly, it is unjustified to evaluate or intervene in the beliefs or practices of any cultural group to which one does not belong. Theoretically, then, the tolerant, pluralist attitude of multiculturalism should allow representatives of different cultural groups to live together without disrespect, disagreement, or conflict.

Since perhaps the 1980s however, this largely optimistic, benign vision of multiculturalism has come under increasing strain, as a number of interconnected factors, collectively contributing to the loosely defined phenomenon of globalisation, are exposing the perceived weaknesses of multiculturalism and threatening its practical applicability. Among these factors is an expanding world population which, with its concomitant pressure on resources, has vastly accelerated the movement of people, either

voluntarily as migrants, or enforced, as in the case of refugees from persecution or war zones. Partly associated with this factor, increasing numbers of people are congregating in urban centres in search of work or economic opportunity, and the majority of the world's population, for the first time in history, now lives in cities. Advanced communication technologies such as television and the internet have also enabled greater access to information and brought people closer together in virtual terms, not just physical.

An obvious result of these radical global transformations in living patterns is that people from diverse cultural backgrounds are increasingly obliged to live in unprecedentedly closer proximity to each other, and the associated differences in thought, belief, and behaviour are more directly encountered in everyday life. While once of merely theoretical concern, matters of divergence from traditional local norms may now be perceived as actual threats to the obtaining social order (however unrealistically conceived): sources of fear, resentment, and hostility. Populist politicians in all parts of the world have cynically exploited these emotions to attain power by demonising the multiculturalist vision and its most obvious manifestations

of immigration and tolerance of diversity, misrepresenting its core principle as one of 'anything goes' nihilism, destructive of social cohesion and traditional patterns. Even many less extreme politicians and thinkers are quietly acknowledging that the multiculturalist project, as currently constituted, is not working, although few have suggestions as to its revision or replacement beyond reviving, in one form or another, the 'melting pot' model of assimilation.

It may be time, therefore, to undertake an investigation of the philosophical basis of the multiculturalist vision, the idea of cultural relativity. In this paper I shall first sketch a history of the development of the idea, going on to analyse a number of contemporary issues on which it has a clear bearing, and concluding with some suggestions as to how the relativist outlook could be preserved in essence, yet modified to provide a better guide to the complex globalised world of today.

Cultural relativity is not a new notion and, while expressed in a variety of forms, its basic tenets can be found throughout history. Over 2,500 years ago the Greek historian Herodotus was discoursing on the practices exhibited by different tribes in the disposal of their dead,

concluding that it was impossible to adjudicate as to whether one method or belief was any more correct or morally sound than any other. And in the 17th century the French philosopher-mathematician Blaise Pascal coined an uncritically relativist phrase that is still quoted today, to the effect that there are truths on one side of the Pyrenees that may be falsehoods on the other. The principle's most influential and enduring academic formulation, however, can be ascribed to the pioneering work of one man, Franz Boas.

Boas (1858-1942) was a German anthropologist who immigrated to the United States in 1887, where his work was to have such an impact that he is today often referred to as the father of American anthropology. Reinforced by formidable scholarship and an elegant writing style, his crucial and revolutionary insight regarding cultural relativity, developed from around 1904 onwards, was that: "There is no fundamental difference in the ways of thinking of primitive and civilized man." (Boas, 1940) An anthropological commonplace today, the truly radical nature of this assertion can only be appreciated by considering the evolutionary conception of sociocultural development prevalent in

the 19th century. According to this generally accepted model, societies progressed over time from a state of savagery, with little or no social organisation, through barbarianism, exhibiting prototypical forms of social structure and hierarchy, to the culminating perfection of civilisation - exemplified, of course, by Western societies. Boas firmly rejected this scheme, identifying it as a form of racism, which he despised, arguing instead that cultural groups necessarily formulated their own responses in adapting to environmental and historical challenges, and that the resulting social institutions were neither more nor less valid than those in any other part of the world.

Among the numerous followers Boas influenced, either directly, through his teaching as professor of anthropology at Columbia University, or through his writings, two in particular are perhaps worthy of mention in the context of cultural relativity. Margaret Mead (1901-1978) is perhaps best known today for her lively ethnographies *Coming of Age in Samoa* (Mead, 2001a), first published in 1928, and *Growing Up in New Guinea* (Mead, 2001b), first published in 1930. Although there has been some controversy among anthropologists regarding Mead's

methodology and conclusions, the books themselves remain in print and exhibit a respectful and robustly non-judgmental attitude to the societies under observation. Their accessibility and popularity with non-anthropologists undoubtedly helped to disseminate the idea of cultural relativity. Mead's mentor, Ruth Benedict (1887-1948), a student of Boas, has had similar influence mainly through her theoretical work *Patterns of Culture* (Benedict, 2006), first published in 1934. The concept of ethnocentrism had been defined back in the mid-19th century by William Sumner, but Benedict gave it a succinct formulation that was to have enduring influence: "An observer will see the bizarre developments of behavior only in alien cultures, not his own." (Benedict, 2006) Perhaps nowhere has this perception been better illustrated than in anthropologist Horace Mitchell Miner's brilliant essay *Body Ritual Among the Nacirema* (Miner, 1956), in which he describes a number of distinctly odd-seeming practices among a society located somewhere in the North American continent, those practices only becoming recognisably familiar when *Nacirema* is read backwards.

By the end of the 20th century, then, a general consensus in favour of cultural relativity had solidified, not

just within anthropology, but also in politics and general public consciousness-at least in the developed world. At the same time, however, cultural relativity was becoming conflated with moral relativity, and some scholars were warning that the acceptance of the principle of *cultural* relativity did not necessarily imply a complete repudiation of all ethical standards, a caveat exemplified by the philosopher Mary Midgley in her book *Can't We Make Moral Judgments?* (Midgley, 1991) Unfortunately, notwithstanding the more measured arguments either for or against relativity in whatever form, a polarising rift was developing between, on the one side, adherents to some universal or absolutist code, usually determined by religious or traditional authority, and extreme cultural relativists on the other who denied the precedence of any one ethical system. Even during the drafting of the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights in 1948 the head of the American Anthropological Association, Melville Herskovits, another student of Boas, argued strongly (but unsuccessfully) that the document should reflect the relativist perspective. The globalising forces alluded to above have only exacerbated tensions between those who subscribe to a more or less rigid set of universally acceptable beliefs

and behaviours, and those who believe in untrammeled freedom of thought and expression.

A recent case in point is the affair of the so-called 'burkini' that was played out on the beaches of the French Mediterranean in 2016. All Muslims are required to adhere to the principle of *hijab*, or modesty in dress, and in order for them to visit the beach without violating this code, Muslim women had developed the 'burkini,' an elegant, close-fitting, full-body swimsuit incorporating a hood covering the hair. Resembling a rather fashionable wetsuit, this garment should have been an unexceptionable mode of dress among the bikinis and thongs more often seen on French beaches, but the mayors of over thirty towns and cities along the Mediterranean littoral banned the garment as being 'against French tradition,' enforcing the ban with arrests by armed police and fines, photographs of which actions occasioned fierce debate around the world. The French High Court did eventually rule the ban unconstitutional, but many of the mayors vowed to continue with the prohibition. To add some important context, these incidents took place only a couple of months after the horrifying Bastille Day incident in Nice, in which a Jihadi terrorist

drove a truck into a crowd of revelers, killing almost one hundred, so tensions were understandably high. Nevertheless, it is hard to see the connection between a terrorist outrage and an innovative swimsuit, and the argument that the 'burkini' somehow violates French tradition is ludicrous, given the self-evident fact that traditions change all the time. Even the misnamed French 'headscarf ban' of 2004 was not applicable specifically to Moslems, banning as it did the outward display of any religious symbol - including the crucifix-in public institutions. Furthermore, a no doubt unintended and unanticipated consequence of this ban was a rise in the number of religious schools that were outside the jurisdiction of the ban.

Disputes over clothing and accessories, however emotionally charged, can probably be resolved with patience and goodwill, and are anyway, in the larger scheme of things, less important than matters involving what legal scholars term 'irreparable physical harm.' This phrase refers to actions committed in the name of culture or tradition that have a permanent physical effect on the injured party, usually without their consent. Various forms of body modification fall into this category, such as scarification,

common in many African and other societies as a clan or tribal marker, but performed on infants before they are able to assent to the procedure, raising the complex question of parental rights in opposition to the rights of minors. A similar objection can be made to the religiously motivated practice of circumcision of male infants in Jewish and Muslim communities, and the topic of female circumcision is probably the most contentious intercultural issue dividing communities today. Clearly the long-term consequences for females undergoing genital cutting, in whatever form, are more serious than for males, and the general point can be made that females worldwide are far more likely to suffer from cultural traditions than males. The view that a woman or girl is the property of a male, usually either the husband or the father, is thought in many cultures to give the male absolute right over the woman's body, even to the extent of forced marriage, including that of minors, physical violence or, in the case of perceived dishonour, murder.

Of course, immigrants in a country are subject to the laws of that country, but the problem for multicultural societies is that of deciding to what extent imported cultural practices should be accommodated, as opposed to the extent

to which immigrants should be required to assimilate to the host country's traditions, many of which would be perceived as contrary to the immigrants' cultural or religious beliefs. In her book *The Cultural Defense* (Renteln, 2004), the legal scholar Alison Dundes Renteln argues cogently for what she terms the 'principle of maximum accommodation,' by which judges and juries should be made aware of the cultural reasons for the actions of the accused, not in order to exculpate the offender, but to provide additional information in possible mitigation. In the current polarised climate, however, moderate suggestions such as this are unlikely to get much of a hearing.

There remains in any case the question of how to react to perceived wrongs in the cultural practices of other sovereign states in the name of supposedly universal human rights, such as encapsulated in the UN declaration. This document has frequently been attacked in the developing world as unevenly Eurocentric in origin, and any attempt to criticise or intervene in the traditions of other countries is therefore condemned as arrogant neocolonialism. So child marriage, child labour, violence against women, extreme legal sanctions, and the persecution of LGBT individuals can all be defended on the grounds of traditional culture,

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and any interference from outside the society is rejected as either invalid or imperialist. Again, the rigid, entrenched positions taken by participants on both sides of these debates preclude any respectful exchange of opinion.

An area of growing importance in which relativist ideas are being challenged is that of the treatment of non-human animals. Recent findings in biology and ethology, and the writings of philosophers like Peter Singer (Singer, 2016) are increasingly influential in persuading people that the notion of specifically human rights is too limiting. Sport hunting, as distinct from hunting for food or protection, is attracting widespread opprobrium, as evidenced by the outcry against the Minnesota dentist who paid $55,000 to kill a well-known lion, Cecil, in a Zimbabwe park in 2015. Foxhunting in England, a quintessential cultural tradition, has now been made illegal as a result of public pressure, and the annual Canadian seal hunt, in which baby seals are clubbed to death for their pelts, inspires larger protests each year. A similar movement against the exploitation of animals for entertainment is clearly growing in strength and influence; zoos, marine parks, and circuses are no longer the innocent attractions they once were, and traditional

practices of obliging animals such as bulls, dogs, and cocks to fight are dying out. Even the raising of animals for food has come under greater scrutiny, and several graphic films as well as books such as Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (Pollan, 2006) have helped to raise awareness of modern slaughterhouse practices and encourage a movement toward more sustainable food consumption, including vegetarianism. The sacrifice of animals for religious purposes is a worldwide phenomenon, not just confined to developing societies, and the First Amendment to the United States Constitution protects this right, with the result that Santeria practitioners are free to sacrifice chickens and goats to their deities, and Jews and Muslims, in accordance with the dietary requirements of *kosher* and *halal*, slaughter animals while they are still conscious.

All of the above instances, though clearly far from an exhaustive list, can be the cause of disagreements and hostility that threaten the implementation of multicultural policies, but need not result in their total failure. While accelerated immigration perhaps exhibits the greatest potential for intercultural misunderstanding and conflict, there are comparably serious fissures to be found within

apparently stable societies-over such issues as gun control, abortion rights, animal rights, and political or religious allegiance, for example. In every case, the only means to achieving successful resolution of such differences in values is that of mutually respectful dialogue and empathy, factors that are conspicuous by their absence in the polarised camps that have been established on either side of these divisive questions. In the final part of this paper, therefore, I shall discuss three approaches that may help to identify an essential but elusive, reconciliatory path that avoids on the one hand a 'one-size-fits-all' universalism, with its neocolonial implications, and on the other an extreme relativism that, in its denial of any moral absolutes, can come close to an unproductive nihilism.

The first approach is the theoretical one of the Harvard educational psychologist William Perry, who devised a four-stage dynamic model of cognitive and ethical development. (Perry, 1998) Perry's scheme postulated that human infants hold an essentially dualist view of the world, in that something is either true or false, right or wrong, normal or abnormal, as determined by an authority figure -usually a parent, teacher, or religious figure. With experience,

the child realises that there are different versions of the true and the good-multiple perspectives, as Perry terms this second stage-but the thinking is still dualist, in that there is still one correct answer to such questions; the task is to determine which it is. Perry contends that experiencing this state of "cognitive disequilibrium," while confusing, is essential to progressing to the next stage, that of contextual relativity, in which truth and goodness are evaluated according to the situation; there is no one truth that applies in every circumstance. The final stage is the mature one of committed relativity, which involves an acceptance that the process of appraisal is continuous, and requires the mental flexibility to adapt or abandon previously held convictions in the light of new knowledge or experience. An important caveat for Perry, however, was that this development is not necessarily unidirectional; under conditions of stress, people can revert to an earlier stage of the model, finding comfort and stability in the dualist perspective. Obviously, encounters with cultural difference can be highly stressful, and dualist responses are therefore to be expected, although need not be encouraged, which is the deplorable strategy of many populist leaders in denouncing multiculturalism: the 'us versus them,' 'with us

or against us' tactic.

The second approach that may be useful in dealing with cultural difference is the pragmatic one of the anthropologist Henry Bagish, who wrote eloquently about his partial conversion away from the relativist paradigm held by his peers. After much deliberation, Bagish concluded that, "Cultural relativity is actually a moral theory that gives a central place to one value: tolerance." (Bagish, 1981) As Bagish concedes, tolerance is an admirable trait, but humans in different cultures tend to exhibit a hierarchy of values, in which some (community, tradition, a sense of justice) may be more important than tolerance. Bagish therefore suggests appealing to other values as a persuasion strategy, as in, "if you love your children, and do not want them to catch smallpox, vaccination may be a better preventative than goat sacrifice," or "if you wish to mark your daughter's passage into womanhood, a symbolic nick may be safer than a full clitoridectomy." Obviously this approach is not guaranteed to be effective, but it at least constitutes an invitation to dialogue, rather than the dualist, 'that's just wrong!' pronouncements of so many campaigns against controversial cultural practices.

The third approach is the activist one of the historian Timothy Garton Ash, who advocates the employment of what he calls 'robust civility.' (Ash, 2016) For Ash, civility is a great deal more than mere politeness, but is, in fact, an obligation incumbent on all members of civil, now global, society to be *curious, informed*, and *engaged*. Curiosity in this sense does not just limit itself to what other people do or say or believe, but extends to engaging with others and trying to understand the reasons for their actions, leading to the acquisition of new information and consequently deeper engagement and enhanced curiosity. Obviously the key to Ash's definition of civility is dialogue, and this involves, controversially, the other term in his formulation, robustness. For dialogue to be effective, it has to be open, honest, and unhindered by the paralysing fear of giving offence, and Ash sees great danger in the rigid application of political correctness codes and trigger warnings. Of course, participants in a dialogue should treat each other respectfully, but the philosopher Stephen Darwall has defined two kinds of respect, that he distinguishes using the terms *recognition* and *appraisal*. (Darwall, 2013) Recognition respect is that due to another simply by virtue of their being a human

being, equal in worth and dignity. Appraisal respect, however, refers to the content of the other's speech or behaviour, and considered, informed evaluation and its expression are not just appropriate, but required-the responsibility of all members of any society. Interacting with others while striving to maintain an attitude that embodies both types of respect may enable a constructive engagement in which both parties develop new perspectives on an issue. As both Perry and Bagish would surely agree, in different situations some truths may well be more appropriate than others.

While some combination of the three approaches outlined above may help in engaging with the challenges inherent in cultural relativity, the task of reconciling the entire range of differences in identities, beliefs, and values is clearly an impractical goal. Nevertheless, in conclusion, some tentative principles may perhaps be advanced. Most importantly, the committed relativity defined by Perry enables an adherence to moral standards but simultaneously demands the flexibility to continually review and adapt these in accordance with new situations and new information. As the sociologist Steven Lukes has written "The idea that radically diverse values inhere in 'cultures,' like so many windowless boxes

viewed in holistic and essentialist terms, cannot be sustained." (Lukes, 2008) That is, both individuals and the cultures to which they belong must accept, and be open to, change. The nature and direction of such change must be the outcome of mutually respectful dialogue, advocated above by both Bagish and Ash, although respectful interchange should not preclude the committed expression of personal opinion and moral conviction.

"Broadly speaking," writes the historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto, "towards the end of the twentieth century a frail consensus in favour of pluralism emerged as the only workable strategy for a globalizing world with intermingled cultures." (Fernández-Armesto, 2015) Multiculturalist policies, and the principle of cultural relativity itself, may indeed be under attack, perceived as destructive of established cultural traditions and even ethically nihilist, but in a post-imperial era the imposition of any universalist code is clearly impractical, as well as immoral, since no one culture can plausibly claim to be in possession of the one best form of human social existence. However, more or less justified criticisms notwithstanding, the continuance of the multiculturalist conversation is surely the only viable path forward for a world of increasing complexity.

Through dialogue, empathy, and a sincere desire for mutual understanding, a balance can and must be achieved.

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