

(The following essay is provided for you to practice writing an essay outline.)

Why Believe in Cultural Relativism?

Cultural relativism is the belief that morality is relative to culture. According to cultural relativists, a certain practice (e.g. slavery, homosexuality, or the persecution of homosexuals) is morally right in some cultures, and wrong in others, depending on whether that culture *accepts* the practice. In other words, there is no set of objective moral facts that determine a *universal* morality—one that applies to *all* cultures. In my essay I will argue that the standard arguments for cultural relativism fail, so that there no grounds to accept it.

Ruth Benedict, an anthropologist, has argued in favor of cultural relativism in her book *Patterns of Culture* (1934). These arguments have been extremely influential, so I will summarise two of them here before criticising them.

Benedict's first argument is based on cultural variation. She observed different indigenous tribes, and found that what is considered morally right or wrong can vary significantly from one society to another. For example, Benedict observed that the Pueblo Indians emphasise the importance of cooperation and harmony within their society. This includes the avoidance of competition and aggression, which contrasts with individualistic and competitive values found in other cultures, such as the Kwakiutl. The competitive behaviors of the Kwakiutl, such as their potlach ceremonies, would be considered morally questionable in Pueblo society.

Benedict argues that if there were objective moral norms, applying to all cultures, then the variation between cultures would be much less than it is observed to be. The evidence shows, therefore, that moral values are culturally constructed, and dependent on each culture's unique history, environment, and social dynamics.

Benedict's second argument for cultural relativism, based on the need to avoid ethnocentrism, is a fundamental component of her anthropological perspective. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to judge other cultures by the standards and values of one's own culture.

Benedict argued that ethnocentrism often leads to a biased and narrow-minded view of other cultures and can hinder cross-cultural understanding and cooperation. Cultural relativism, on the other hand, helps combat ethnocentrism by encouraging individuals to understand and appreciate the moral systems of other cultures, rather than imposing their own values on them. This, in turn, fosters greater harmony and mutual respect in a world of cultural diversity.

These arguments offered by Benedict, despite their influence, have serious difficulties. In making the cultural variation argument, for example, Benedict is guilty of focusing on relatively minor differences between cultures, and ignoring the significant similarities. Virtually all cultures promote fairness, honesty, and the protection of vulnerable members, for example, and prohibit murder. Moreover, even if there were such wide variations in moral norms, this would provide little (if any) support to cultural relativism. Different tribes also have widely divergent views on objective matters like geography, but are we to say that the earth is flat for some tribes, round for others, and there is no objective fact of the matter? Of course not. Benedict is correct that a tribe's *understanding* of moral norms will be shaped by their history and environment, but this is very far from showing that objective moral norms do not exist.

Benedict's ethnocentrism argument is unfortunately so bad that it is hard to know where to start! One might begin with the fact that her argument actually undermines itself, as she seems to view ethnocentrism itself as *objectively* wrong. There are plenty of cultures (most of them, in fact) where it is considered normal and appropriate to judge other cultures by the standards and values of one's own culture. According to cultural relativism, therefore, ethnocentrism is morally correct in most cultures, which undermines her rejection of it. Isn't she guilty of ethnocentrism in doing so?

A second objection to the ethnocentrism argument is that it argues for cultural relativism to be *true*, based on its *good effects*, such as harmony and mutual respect between cultures. However, I believe that one can obtain similar benefits without accepting cultural relativism as true, by merely adopting a posture of humility and curiosity. She is right that, in order to understand another culture, one has to (temporarily) set aside one's own beliefs, and study that culture in its own terms. But this applies to a culture's *factual* beliefs, such as in geography and medicine, just as much as its *moral* beliefs. Clearly, we don't need to accept

geographical relativism to study a tribe's beliefs about geography, so why would it be necessary to accept moral relativism to study its moral beliefs?

I conclude then that cultural relativism has no good arguments in its favour. I expect, however, that critics will object that those (like myself) who believe in objective moral norms have done immense harm by imposing their own society's norms on vulnerable indigenous people worldwide. Surely a belief that is harmful cannot be regarded as true? In response, I accept that such harm has often occurred (unfortunately) due to the specific moral beliefs of the colonisers being incorrect. In other cases, however, colonisers have helped indigenous peoples by imposing their correct moral norms. For example, in India the abhorrent practice of suttee was banned under British rule. In other words, a belief in objective moral norms is not itself harmful, but only when combined with incorrect moral beliefs.

In summary, I have considered the main arguments given by Ruth Benedict in support of cultural relativism, and found them wanting. I conclude that there are no grounds to accept it.