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Critiquing Cultural Relativism

Jaret Kanarek

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural relativism is the ever-popular theory claiming that, “any set of customs and institutions, or way of life, is as valid as any other.”¹ In its appeal to tolerance—the seemingly incontrovertible “virtue” of the modern era—it has gained wide appeal amongst myriad disciplines, most notably in the social sciences.² However, the theory is destructive in both theory *and* practice. In theory, cultural relativism emphatically denies reason and objective reality.³ In practice, it sanctions the worst manifestations of violence and oppression.

II. CULTURAL RELATIVISM DEFINED

That cultural relativism is not simply a statement about the equal validity of cultures, but a *theory* dependent on explicit philosophic fundamentals, is central to its proper understanding. Franz Boas, oft referred to as the father of American anthropology, first expounded the theoretical basis of cultural relativism in a number of essays published in the 1920s.⁴ Melville Herskovits, a well-known anthropologist and student of Boas, fur-

1 Frank E. Hartung, “Cultural Relativity and Moral Judgments,” *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Apr., 1954), pp. 118-126. Published by The University of Chicago Press for the Philosophy of Science Association.

2 Tolerance is often touted as an end in itself, and on a grand scale. In the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance, created by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), tolerance is upheld as “a moral duty” and “as the virtue that makes peace possible” (Article 1, November 16, 1995).

3 In her essay, “In The Name of Culture: Culture Relativism and the Abuse of the Individual,” Elizabeth M. Zechenter points out that cultural relativism has many variants and, as such, cannot be spoken of a monolithic theory (pp. 323). She isolates three broad yet distinct variants as follows: descriptive relativism (or weak relativism), normative relativism (or strong relativism), and epistemological relativism (or extreme relativism). In this essay, it is the latter two that I am explicitly critiquing. The reader is free to apply the arguments herein to descriptive relativism at his or her discretion. Also, “objective reality,” as it is used in this essay, is defined as reality existing independent of man’s mind, feelings, perceptions, wishes, et cetera. That is, it is the facts of reality are *facts* regardless of whether men choose to believe them.

4 Marguerite Holloway, “The Paradoxical Legacy of Franz Boas – father of American anthropology,” *Natural History*, 1997.

ther elucidated the theory. Cultural relativism, posits Herskovits, begins with the notion that experience is man's primary connection to reality. It is through experience that man comes to know about the world, and it is from this experience that judgments are derived. Herskovits wrote, "judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation."⁵ Enculturation is the process by which a culture conditions man's mind, thus influencing his conceptual make-up.⁶

Enculturation is not latent. Herskovits remarks that, "the force of the enculturative experience channels all judgments."⁷ As one scholar further explains:

"Cultures inculcated their members with moral and ethical rules through involuntary socialization and enculturation and...few, if any, individuals were consciously aware of the arbitrary character of beliefs that were ingrained into them."⁸

There are two defining aspects of this process. First, enculturation is "involuntary." Second, it is in large part unconsciously accepted. Resultantly, any conviction of an individual or group is inherently "arbitrary" because they are determined solely by accident of birth.

Thus, the starting point of cultural relativism is an assertive epistemological claim about man's nature. Judgment, it holds, is reliant on experience—experience that is inseparable from its cultural context. Since man's judgments are culture-bound, so too are his methods of reasoning and knowledge. As Herskovits states, "Evaluations are relative to the cultural background out of which they arise."⁹ This does not solely pertain

5 Paul F. Schmidt, "Some Criticisms of Cultural Relativism," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 52, No. 25 (Dec. 8, 1955), pp. 782.

6 *Ibid.* pp. 782

7 Melville Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism* (New York, Vintage Books, 1973).

8 Elizabeth M. Zechenter, "In The Name of Culture: Culture Relativism and the Abuse of the Individual," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 53, No. 3, Universal Human Rights Versus Cultural Relativity (Autumn, 1997), pp. 324.

9 Melville Herskovits, *Man and His Works* (New York, A. A. Knopf, 1948), pp. 63. Note: Herskovits remains unchanged in his views regarding the subject in the 1955 abridged version of his work, *Cultural Anthropology*.

to value judgments, but to *all* reasoning and to *all* knowledge. Herskovits continues, “Even the facts of the physical world are 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.”¹⁰

As such, reality is interpreted according to each man’s inherently culture-bound perceptions. Reality is not objective, but rather subjective in that its nature is determined by and dependent upon its perceiver. The following is one scholar’s summation of the cultural relativist’s view of reality and man’s knowledge of it:

“All experience is culturally mediated. There is no reality known to man beyond, or in addition to, cultural reality...it follows a priori that all modes of perception and all value judgments are also culturally conditioned... This thesis implies that culture is an absolute reality...and that all modes of human experience and thought are relative thereto because they are functions of culture and dependent on it for their form and content.”¹¹

Consequently, the philosophic basis of cultural relativism becomes quite clear. Epistemologically, man’s mind—in content and form—is inevitably culture-bound and arbitrarily defined. Metaphysically, “there is no such thing as objective reality, truth, or reason.”¹²

This philosophical groundwork gives rise to cultural relativism’s socio-political claim for the “unqualified tolerance of all cultures.”¹³ Given that its foundation is mutually exclusive with any objective cross-cultural standard, value, or method, cultural relativism thus eliminates the possibility of cross-cultural judgment. There are, in fact, innumerable cultures and thus innumerable realities, each with their own truths and moralities. There can be no universally “good” or “bad” practices since what constitutes “good” and “bad” is relative to each culture. Even in regard to the vast bodies of knowledge and progress science has brought mankind, cultural relativism asserts that science is no more than “a culturally biased way of

10 *Ibid.* pp. 64.

11 David Bidney, “The Philosophical Presuppositions of Cultural Relativism and Cultural Absolutism,” *Ethics and the Social Sciences* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1959), pp. 66.

12 Zechenter, pp. 325.

13 *Ibid.* pp. 326.

thinking that is no different from magic or witchcraft.”¹⁴

Evidently, cultural relativism is much more than a simple statement claiming the equal validity of all cultures. It is a full-fledged philosophic theory, which “asserts that there is no absolute truth, be it ethical, moral, or cultural, and that there is no meaningful way to judge different cultures because all judgments are ethnocentric.”¹⁵

III. THEORETICAL CRITIQUE

By definition, cultural relativism does not just dismiss even the slightest possibility of objectivity; it vehemently scoffs at any attempt to integrate knowledge beyond one’s own culture-bound reality. The premises, upon which cultural relativism is based, as well as its assertive claim about the equal validity of all cultures, are anything but vague on this issue. This is the first way in which cultural relativism emphatically denies reason and objective reality.

The second way cultural relativism denies reason and objective reality is in its very formulation. Reason is the faculty that *identifies* and *integrates* the material provided by man’s senses.¹⁶ Identification is the process by which man applies the law of identity to his existence. It is his recognition that each existent has a specific identity—that A is A, and that A has a specific nature by which it can be nothing other than A. Integration is man’s process of abstracting from his identifications, thus allowing him to move from the perceptual to the conceptual level. The perceptual level is defined by the direct awareness of existents. If man’s concepts are to be valid, i.e. in accord with reality, they must be non-contradictory—all of what he has identified about reality must be consistent. He cannot hold A and not A to be true simultaneously. A fact of reality and its opposite cannot both be *logically* integrated within the same consciousness. Logic is the art of non-contradictory identification and integration.¹⁷

In its formulation, cultural relativism violates the most basic law

14 *Ibid.* pp. 325.

15 *Ibid.* pp. 323.

16 Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 20. It should be noted that the following is a much-abbreviated summation of Objectivism’s (the philosophy of Ayn Rand) stance on reason. This is the framework that will be utilized herein, and there is no full proof of the aforementioned here. For proof of the underlying theory presented, see Leonard Peikoff’s *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*.

17 Ayn Rand, “Galt’s Speech,” *For the New Intellectual*, pp. 125.

of logic: the Law of Identity—the law stating that A is A. Its philosophic premises and its conclusion are necessarily at odds. If the theory is valid, then the conclusion is nullified. Cultural relativism holds that *all* convictions, even the laws of physics, are culture-bound. These convictions have neither applicability nor truth outside of the cultural context from which they originate. Such a conclusion must then apply equally to cultural relativism.

If cultural relativism is valid then we should regard all theories and beliefs, including cultural relativism, as culture-bound phenomena. Cultural relativism is, in fact, a predominantly western theory situated primarily in the subculture that is the ivory tower. It would be wrong, by its own accord, to apply cultural relativism cross-culturally since it is just another culture-bound theory. Indeed, some cultures hold cultural relativism to be valid while many others hold it to be invalid. According to cultural relativism, it is necessary to conclude that both views are equally valid. Yet, they are opposing theories: one states A, and the other, not A. A conclusion and its negation cannot both be right—logically, they are mutually exclusive. Yet, the very formulation of cultural relativism necessitates a logical contradiction.

The consequence of this contradiction is damning. Concludes one scholar, “the theory destroys its own basis.”¹⁸ He continues:

“[Cultural relativism] is intended to be an empirical truth of anthropology and sociology holding for all cultures, but it destroys the basis for the objectivity which is required to make meaningful assertions that are cross-cultural. It destroys objectivity because the frame of reference for measurement in each culture is somehow peculiarly ‘true’ for that culture and no over-arching or inter-cultural standard is available to objectively adjudicate inconsistent reports. Thus the cultural relativist cannot have it both ways: he cannot claim that the truth of factual judgments are relative to their cultural background and at the same time believe in the objectivity of sociological and anthropological investigations.”

This, at the very least, makes cultural relativism untenable—no

18 Schmidt, pp. 781.

theory can uphold a contradiction of this nature and be considered logically valid. To attempt to do so not only is an evasion of reason, but an attempt to obliterate it. Yet, there is another notable evasion taking place in the formulation of cultural relativism.

That evasion is in regard to a critical fact of reality: man's volitional nature. Cultural relativism regards man as a product of enculturation—an involuntary and uncritically accepted process by which the content of man's mind is determined by his culture. There can be little room for volition in this framework since man is unaware of, let alone able to challenge, the force that is determining his conceptual make-up. Everything men "choose" to value, believe, and pursue, is simply a product of his cultural conditioning, and as such, is inherently arbitrary. Such an assertion could only make B.F. Skinner blush.¹⁹

Contra cultural relativism, man's mind is not a ball of clay on which incontestable and unknown forces exert themselves. Man is undoubtedly a volitional being, i.e. he is able to choose his values, ideas, and actions. In every issue and with respect to every idea, he can choose to evaluate it or not, and he can choose to accept it or not. This is fundamental to man's "metaphysically given nature," observes philosopher and novelist Ayn Rand.²⁰ She elucidates:

"A man's volition is outside the power of other men. What the unalterable basic constituents are to nature, the attribute of a volitional consciousness is to the entity 'man.' Nothing can force a man to think. Others may offer him incentives or impediments, rewards or punishments, they may destroy his brain by drugs or by the blow of a club, but they cannot order his mind to function: *this* is in his exclusive, sovereign power."

Man is undoubtedly shaped by his culture in numerous ways, but he will only be so to the extent that he chooses to accept its customs and beliefs. And history has shown that many individuals refuse to accept such

19 B.F. Skinner is a famous psychologist and behaviorist claiming that environmental factors determine man's behavior. In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, he states that, "a person does not act upon the world, the world acts upon him."

20 Ayn Rand, "The Metaphysical Versus the Man-Made," *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, pp. 31.

beliefs, often breaking entirely with the dominant thought of their respective eras. Aristotle, against the backdrop of centuries of mysticism, offered the first rational philosophy in recorded history. Sir Isaac Newton rejected the scientific theories of his time and fundamentally redefined physics and the methods by which science was conducted. Our nation's founding fathers created a political system unlike that of any realized in their time.

All of these great men were unprecedentedly radical for their time, somehow overcoming the supposed beliefs “ingrained into them.” Barring volition, such feats would be neither possible nor explainable. In most of the cases, the prevailing cultural attitude was fundamentally opposed to the ideas and achievements of these men. If the notion of enculturation held true, what would give rise to these unprecedented and radical men? How and why did these men do what they did? The thoughts and actions of these men were revolutionary in their respective eras, and it is doubtful that some abstract cultural phenomenon necessitated these achievements.

For example, pre-Aristotelian philosophy condemned the material world as illusory, instead praising the mystic realm of Forms (as Plato did), or some other transcendental world, as the true and supreme reality.²¹ The world had little knowledge or awareness of a non-mystic philosophy prior to that of Aristotle's, and there was hardly any significant cultural impetus for a philosophy of his kind. It was Aristotle's choice to think, evaluate, and reject the dogma of his time that made his achievements possible.

Of course, the cultural relativist could claim that X or Y cultural factor gave rise to these achievements, but such a claim is non-falsifiable—it is neither testable nor open to empirical investigation. To prove enculturation, it would be necessary to provide a method by which a causal relationship between generally held views and the specific content of an individual's mind could be empirically shown. Such a method is not yet possible, and even if it were, the cultural relativist would have to denounce it as just another “culturally biased way of thinking that is no different from magic or witchcraft.”

Not only that, but enculturation is an empirical delusion. The notion that moral rules, beliefs, values, and practices are “involuntarily” ingrained into the minds of individuals is absurd. Even the most susceptible minds, such as those of children, do not operate in this way. Simply im-

21 See Plato's *Phaedo* and *Republic*, for example.

mersing a child with moral rules and the like will neither garner their acceptance nor ensure their practice. Instead, the child must actively seek to understand and apply them by choice. As Rand observed about the learning process:

“To understand means to focus on the content of a given subject (as against the sensory—visual or auditory—form in which it is communicated), to isolate its essentials, to establish its relationship to the previously known, and to integrate it with the appropriate categories of other subjects.”²²

This view is far from controversial. A child will not learn by osmosis if he is placed amidst other children in a classroom. At most, the child may be able to parrot a concept of which he has no understanding, but he will learn nothing without seeking to understand the content of the lesson being taught. The fact that so much focus is placed on trying to get kids interested in learning is evidence enough to prove this point. If children simply absorbed knowledge presented to them with no volitional effort on their part, their interest in learning would not be an issue.

Or take the basic skill of reading. A man could spend years locked in a library full of books, yet he would not learn to read without actively seeking to understand what was before his eyes. If he wants to read, he must choose to open a book, make sense of the various markings, form the concepts of letters, sounds, words, meanings, et cetera. Man’s mind is not filled with efficacious content “involuntarily.” Learning is not a passive process.

For a theory that is supposed to assert “an empirical truth” about man’s nature, it is inexcusable that enculturation cannot be empirically verified and explicitly prohibits progress in doing so. That enculturation is grounded in a blatant empirical delusion about man’s volitional nature and, subsequently, his learning process, is arguably worse.

So far, cultural relativism has been shown to be vehemently opposed to—and be without any basis in—reason and reality. By definition, it is a rejection of both. In its formulation, it unapologetically necessitates an untenable contradiction and evades crucial aspects of reality, such as man’s

22 Ayn Rand, *Return of the Primitive: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*, pp. 68.

volitional nature, while relying on non-falsifiable assertions and empirical delusions as its “empirical” basis. To this extent it is fully destructive in theory, as it undermines not only itself but also all knowledge, including but not limited to, scientific methods and the fundamental laws of nature. Cultural relativism is therefore a destructive force in theory and is thus bound to be destructive in practice.

IV. PRACTICAL CRITIQUE

It is in practice that cultural relativism sanctions the worst manifestations of violence and oppression. Cultural relativism accomplishes this in two ways. First, it makes the innocent morally defenseless against those that wish to do them harm. Second, it morally sanctions the actions of the aggressors.

In regard to the first, to be morally defenseless is to be without any valid moral ground by which one can justify his actions, convictions, or character. Cultural relativism disarms men by proclaiming that there are no standards, whether moral of any other form, by which cross-cultural judgment is at all possible. Logically, in lieu of any standard, judgmental proclamations of any kind are meaningless. What weight can be ascribed to the proclamation that something is good or bad without a criterion for determining what constitutes the good and bad?

As it applies to cross-cultural judgments, it is important to note that cultures are not monolithic, static, floating abstraction independent of the individuals, practices, and ideas that comprise them. In fact, cultures do evolve. They often replace old modes of life for new ones, and in doing so adopt new ideas and practices.

That being the case, cultural relativism’s claim “that there is no meaningful way to judge different cultures” is to claim just that about the individuals, ideas and practices of cultures. When cultural relativism proclaims that all cultures are equal, it says so about real—past or present, dominant or underground—ideas and practices as maintained by the individuals upholding them.

Incontrovertibly opposing ideas and practices throughout the world’s various cultures, then, become problematic for the cultural relativist framework.

The 1939 German invasion of Poland, for example, elucidates this

issue. During World War II, the German Nazis believed they had a moral and valid claim to takeover of the rest of the world. One prominent expression of this belief was the Nazi's principle of *Lebensraum*, or "living space," supposedly justifying national conquest as an ordained right of the Aryan race for the purposes of natural development. Conversely, Poland maintained and acted on the principle of national sovereignty. Despite these diametrically opposed principles, Germany invaded Poland under the pretense that it had a right to do so, while Poland staunchly denied such a right.

In the cultural relativist framework, however, the German claim to Poland is just as valid as Poland's claim to sovereignty. Accordingly, the Nazi fantasy of world domination and their practice of brutal invasions and genocide are equally as valid as the idea of sovereignty and the practice of it. On what basis, then, is Poland to claim a right to its sovereignty when claims to its enslavement are equally as valid? The result is the moral disarmament of the innocent—Poland would be left with few, if any, means to effectively rebut Germany's actions and justification.

As such, cultural relativism makes cross-cultural judgments impossible—it leaves no means by which different ideas and practices of cultures can be judged. The result is obvious: the innocent are left morally defenseless against their aggressors. Its framework—if taken to be true and applied as such—automatically disarms the victims. It does so through its universal denial of any standard by which an idea or practice may be judged, at least cross-culturally.

But isn't it equally possible that the Nazi's are left with no means to challenge Poland's claims to sovereignty? Isn't cultural relativism the theory of tolerance that supposedly prevents acts of aggression? As Frank Hartung, esteemed professor of sociology at Wayne State University, eloquently answers:

"This particular approach to tolerance gives aid to the enemies of tolerance. This is because the cultural relativist disarms himself in advance against aggression by an authoritarian. He is himself convinced, and has publicly announced his conviction, that any way of life is as good as his own...If every way of life is equally valid, the cultural relativist has, logically, no right to insist upon imposing tol-

erance on a variant way of life that is based upon intolerance.”²³

Cultural relativism, still, goes a step further in that it morally sanctions the aggressors. It does so by ascribing validity to their actions. If all ways of life are equally valid because there are various cultural ideas and practices and there is no way to adjudicate them, then the source of their validity lies in the fact that they *are* cultural practices. In other words, an idea or practice is valid precisely because it is an idea or practice in some culture. As a result:

“One is compelled to accept any cultural pattern as vindicated precisely by its cultural status: slavery, cannibalism, Nazism, or Communism may not be congenial to Christians or to contemporary Western societies, but moral criticism of the cultural patterns of other people is precluded.”²⁴

This means that practices such as forced female genital mutilation, which affects millions of women around the globe and often leads to severe physical and mental ailment, infection, and death, is valid and has value because it is a practice. It means that the kidnapping, brainwashing, and transformation of hundreds of thousands of children into child soldiers who commit the most abhorred atrocities is valid because it is a practice.

Coupled with the notion of equal validity, cultural relativism affirms that these ideas and practices are not only valid and valuable, but that they are on par with their polar opposites. The cultural relativist must be committed to the notion that a culture protecting individual rights for all men and women is as equally as valid as one in which women, minorities, or other groups are treated unequally and unfairly under the law. He must be committed to the notion that a childhood placing emphasis on education, friends, recreation, and the overall pursuit of happiness is equally as valid as a childhood of slavery, abuse, and violence. He must be so as long as the practice is a part of the world’s many cultures. One only needs to look to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Darfur, or Iran, to discover that such modes of life are the reality for countless individuals.

23 Hartung, pp. 125.

24 Zechenter, pp. 324.

Apart from the disarmament of the innocent, the additional dimension is clear; the aggressors are granted a *moral blank check* for their actions. The theory that affirms the validity of any idea or practice because it is an idea or practice is the first to grant sanction to the aggressors. In this way, cultural relativism precipitates the worst forms of atrocity and oppression. As further demonstrated by one scholar's poignant historical application of the theory to World War II:

“The Nazi thinks that it is right for him to exterminate Jews, condemn without trial, appropriate foreign lands and kill resisting foreign persons, violate international law, etc. Why is it right for him to think and act thus? Because these are the accepted value judgments of his culture. Hence it is right for him to follow them. The American thinks that the opposites of the above value judgments are right. Why? Because in the United States these are the accepted value judgments...Each side can legitimately, on this theory, claim it is right and both sides can be asserting true propositions.”²⁵

Note that the innocent are left unable to challenge the claims of the aggressors. Also note that the means by which each conviction is granted validity is through the fact that they *are* convictions. Cultural relativism, then, can only empower the aggressors: both by disarming the innocent and sanctioning the aggressors' actions. With no means of adjudication, it is no wonder why this scholar concludes that “ethical disagreements are not solved by cultural relativism...but rather one or the other party is dissolved, liquidated.”²⁶ This is not necessarily always the case, but granted a zealous aggressor, it is more than likely.

V. CONCLUSION

Cultural relativism is destructive in both theory and practice. In its theoretical denial of reason and objective reality, it sanctions the worst forms of violence and oppression in practice. This is unsurprising; a theory that adamantly denies reason and reality cannot be suitable for the latter, nor be sound according to the former.

25 Schmidt pp. 786-787.

26 *Ibid*, pp. 787.

The deficiencies with cultural relativism are too important to ignore, and the consequences too far reaching. As such, the purpose of this essay is to provide a cohesive and integrated response to cultural relativism. However, there are many more arguments against cultural relativism that are not included in this criticism. Because this is in fact a criticism, arguments for a positive account of objective, cross-cultural standards are not included. Such considerations are omissions because they are outside the scope of this critique, not because this author concedes their impossibility. Ultimately, it should be clear that cultural relativism deserves to be nothing more than a relic. A relic that perhaps one day cultural anthropologists, social scientists, and those in higher education at large, ought to study as a mistake of their intellectual predecessors.