

Lesson 6

Cultural Relativism

According to Sharia Muslim tradition, a wife is obliged to fulfill the sexual desires of her husband. In 2009, a Sharia state law was passed in Afghanistan stating that a husband had a right to demand sex from his wife every four days unless she was ill or would be harmed by sexual intercourse. The law, which states that "Obedience, readiness for intercourse and not leaving the house without the husband's permission are the duties of the wife," applies only to Shiite Muslims, who make up about 15 percent of the Afghan population. The law created contention both in Afghanistan and abroad. The three hundred protestors who turned out to demonstrate against the new law were pelted with stones by some one thousand Afghans who supported the law. The UN Development Fund for Women has denounced the law as legalized rape of a wife by her husband. Other Western leaders have also spoken out against it. Former President Donald Trump has taken a stand against this practice among Muslims living in the US because it contradicts the freedoms guaranteed in the US Constitution. Backers of the law in Afghanistan denounce these Westerners as meddling in their affairs. "We don't want foreigners interfering in our lives," says Mariam Sajadi, a 24-year-old woman engaged to be married, and defends the law.¹

The Greek Philosopher Herodotus said, "that the conceptions of right and wrong differ from culture to culture." In her book *Patterns of Culture*, Ruth Benedict stated, "Morality differs in

¹ Stone-throwing Afghans swarm women's protest, SAMAA,
<https://www.samaaenglish.tv/news/11796/stone-throwing-afghans-swarm-women-s-protest>
(Accessed 5/23/2022)

every society and is a convenient term for socially approved habits." So on what grounds do people living outside of Afghanistan have to call this law immoral? To many people, this observation that "different cultures have different moral codes" is the key to understanding morality. If there are no moral truths, then the different customs of different societies are all that exist. To call a custom "correct" or "incorrect" would imply that we can judge it by some independent standard of right and wrong. But we would be judging it by the standards of our own culture. Sociologist William Sumner said, "the 'right' way is the way our ancestors used to do things and handed that down, and that the notion of right is in the '*folkway*' of doing things. Cultural relativism maintains that morality is created collectively by groups of humans and that morality, therefore, differs from culture to culture. Cultural relativism is based on public opinion, which determines what is moral and immoral. So there cannot be a universal moral truth for all people; morality is nothing more than socially approved customs. Public opinion, rather than private opinion, determines right and wrong. Cultural relativists point out that something regarded as morally wrong in one culture may be morally praiseworthy in another. We also have to understand that culture can vary throughout time. Over 200 years ago, slave ownership was morally acceptable in the United States, and now slavery is highly immoral. Women had no rights over 100 years ago, but today, that opinion has changed. To know what is right or wrong, we need only ask what the norms and customs of our culture or society are at this point in history. But that does not explain how and why such shifts occur. But because morality is nothing more than customs, we have no grounds for judging the moral practices of another culture or another time in our own culture. So on the surface, we would not be able to say what the Nazis did to the Jews in German culture was wrong, nor what people did to slaves up until the 1860s here in the US. If two cultures disagree about what is morally right and there is no

disagreement about the facts and definitions of key terms, there are no rational means for reaching an agreement. Cultural relativists do not argue merely that some moral values are relative to the culture. Instead, they maintain that all moral values are nothing more than cultural customs.

Before moving on, let us understand what cultural relativism is not, either through the practice of excusing or respect for cultural diversity.

1. **Excusing** states that certain cultural practices like slavery are acceptable simply because the people did not know what they were doing was wrong. Excusing entails granting an exemption from wrongdoing. A person or a group can be excused for several reasons: either they were not aware at the time that what they were doing was wrong, they were not aware at the time that what they were doing it was wrong, or they were misinformed about the nature or consequences of their actions, or they have tried to amend for their wrongdoings. The issue of excusing someone simply because they did not know it was wrong is very similar to our discussion in Lesson 2 on the Abuse Excuse. If Adolf Hitler had stated that he did not realize that it was wrong to kill the Jews, we would not simply say that we should excuse him for his actions. Later in the lesson, we will look at Adolf Eichmann, who tried to use excusing for his actions during the Holocaust.
2. **Respect for Cultural Diversity**, which these items all contain, is a nonmoral value. Items within cultural diversity are culturally significant and show how different cultures celebrate and honor other areas within their culture. For example, in Mexican culture, the celebration of a young woman turning 15 is called a quinceañera, and it is a time of grand celebration marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. In

Jewish culture, that happens at 13 for both boys and girls. How a culture celebrates holidays and birthdays has nonmoral value. Another way to think about cultural diversity is through family traditions.

If you remember, ethics is concerned with what ought to be. On the other hand, sociology and sociological relativism are concerned with what is. Sociological relativism is simply about observing that cultures disagree about moral behavior. Sociologists will look at the culture of the Nazis and want to understand why they massacred the Jews. They will not pass judgment as to whether or not what they did was moral or immoral but acknowledge that there are different views on what the Nazis did. Sociological relativism does not draw any conclusions about the correctness of moral standards. Cultural relativism, in contrast, claims that differences in moral practices necessarily imply that there are no universal moral standards by which to judge a society. For centuries, cultural relativism has been a leading ethical theory in many civilizations. Still, it was not until the Nazi's genocide against the Jews that the belief that culture was the sole determiner of right and wrong began to fall out and lost some of its aspects. Faced with the horrors of the Holocaust, it became harder and harder to maintain the belief that there are no standards of right and wrong outside of cultural norms. Anti-Semitism was a cultural norm supported by the majority of Germans before and during the war rather than a conspiracy of a few deranged and power-hungry men. Not only were the majority of Germans at that time anti-Semitic, but Jews were legally considered nonpersons (outside of the moral community) in Germany and therefore had no substantial rights. Thus, to take a stand against the Holocaust necessitated taking a stand against cultural relativism.

The tribunals at the UN Nuremberg Trials in 1945 put forth a list of universal standards of justice that established parameters on acceptable norms of civilized behavior. Between 1945 and 1949,

over 200 war criminals were tried under this new charter. After his capture in 1962, Adolf Eichmann defended his role in the Holocaust by stating that what he did was acceptable within the German culture. Therefore, he cannot be held accountable. Although he initially had doubts about the extermination program, Eichmann said these doubts were put to rest when he realized that all his friends and professional colleagues supported the program. After all, he thought, "Who am I to judge?" If justice is a cultural creation, we have no justifiable grounds for labeling Eichmann and the Nazi culture unjust or immoral. We can say that the Nazi culture was no better or worse than our culture; it is just different.

Claims by Cultural Relativists

1. **Different societies have different moral codes-** this is undoubtedly true. However, all cultures share some values, such as telling the truth, caring for the young, and prohibiting murder.
2. **A society's moral code determines what is right within that society; if the moral code says a certain action is right, then that action is right, at least within that society.** We must bear in mind the differences between what society believes about morals and what is true. A society's moral code is closely tied to what people in that society consider correct.
3. **No objective standard can be used to judge one society's code as better than another's.** It is challenging to think of ethical principles that should hold for all people at all times. However, if we are to criticize the practice of slavery or the Holocaust, we must appeal to principles that are not tethered to any particular society. One principle to always consider is whether a practice promotes or hinders the people's welfare.
4. **The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is but one among many.**
The moral code of our society indeed has no special status, and we will claim that our

society has no special border. To claim this seems to imply that all codes are the same and all more or less equally good.

5. **It is arrogant for us to judge other cultures-** we should always be tolerant of them.

There is truth in this, but it is greatly overstated. We are often arrogant when criticizing different cultures, and tolerance is generally good. However, we shouldn't tolerate everything. Human societies have done terrible things, and progress occurs when they stop doing them. The toleration of torture, slavery, and rape is a vice and not a virtue.

Critiques

1. **Cultural relativism does not work in a pluralist society-** many of us are members of many cultures based on geography, religion, political party, ethnicity, college, work, etc. What works may vary from culture to culture, and saying that one culture determines our moral right and wrong proves that cultural relativism does not work.
2. **Cultural relativism confuses custom with morality-** remember there is a distinction between moral and nonmoral values. Celebrating holidays and birthdays are nonmoral values, compared with moral values of things like the treatment of women or genocide, which have a moral value. To claim that the acceptance of genocide as a custom is offensive and immoral.
3. **Cultural relativism does not correctly describe how we make moral judgments-** cultural opinions created by the majority do not describe how we understand morality. The cultural opinion of the South stated that the owning of slaves was highly acceptable. The cultural opinion of the Afghan Shiites says that the mistreatment of women is highly acceptable. We do not determine what is moral and immoral by checking the latest polls to see how people feel about the issue. We appeal to transcultural values such as justice and respect for human dignity rather than cultural norms.

4. **Cultural relativism is divisive and creates an us/them mentality:** "We don't want foreigners interfering in our lives," says Mariam Sajadi. It establishes that people from other cultures have inferior moral standards. Then we create racism and sexism, cutting out any discussion based on moral values.