Hugh Mercer Curtler

The Myopia of the Cultural Relativist

Cultural relativism, or the view that all values are meaningful only within specific cultures, has been around at least since the time of the Sophists. But propelled by the sudden fascination of postmodernist intellectuals with the diversity of cultures, and the reduction of so many academic disciplines to “culture studies,” cultural relativism has today become the dominant view of most of those who regard themselves as educated men and women. The attitude seems to be that respect for diverse cultures entails the view that what cultures do is their business and no one outside a given culture is in a position to judge whether activities within that culture are right or wrong. The question one hears at every turn is: Who’s to say? But what happens in any given culture is not necessarily right, and the answer to the sophomoric question Who’s to say? is: anyone with an open mind and the skills necessary to think critically.

Leaving aside for a moment the difficult question of just what a culture is, we must be clear what the cultural relativist maintains. Put as simply as possible, a cultural relativist holds that values are merely natural phenomena, akin to desires, wishes, fears, likes, preferences, etc., that are blended mysteriously but invariably into the psychic makeup of all who live in a particular culture, or subculture, at a particular time. This process of the “blending in” of values is called “enculturation,” and it determines the emotional and intellectual framework of all who live in a particular culture. Most importantly, it is said, the attitudes of those within a particular culture cannot adequately be understood by those outside that culture: at best they can be appreciated and enjoyed, in a kind of connoisseurship.

There are a number of half-truths embedded within this view, and we must flush them out in order to subject them to criticism. To be sure, there is such a thing as enculturation, and all who live within a particular culture, or subculture, unknowingly acquire attitudes and preferences which they carry with them wherever they go. But it is not at all clear that one’s values are determined by enculturation, merely that one’s values are strongly influenced by one’s culture. Secondly, while it is true that those outside a given culture cannot fully understand the values espoused within that culture, it is not at all clear that what I shall call cross-cultural value judgments cannot be made. That is to say, it is not clear that a person in one culture is unwarranted in making judgments about things that happen in another culture, or subculture. Finally, it is not clear that values are nothing
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more than attitudes, preferences, and the like. In fact, this view reduces values to evaluation, which is quite another thing.

I shall expand upon and defend all of these claims as I proceed. Before I do this, however, I want to take up the question of just what a culture is. The way it is used today, the term “culture” is fundamentally ambiguous. It is used to refer to any group of people one wants to focus attention upon, such as women, ethnic minorities, or tribes halfway around the world. More properly speaking, it can also refer to the fruits of that group’s spiritual activities, which reflect the unique way that particular group understands the world and their place within it. The second usage is the one we should examine most closely.

Strictly speaking, “culture” is a term that attaches to the customs, habits, language, and manners of particular social groups frequently, but not always, separated from other groups in place and/or time. Those who people separate cultures are often identifiable by their physical appearance, but always by their customs, and especially by their language or dialect. Of central importance in identifying a particular culture are the specific schemata, or intellectual and emotional frames of reference, of those who constitute that culture. These schemata are reflected in the culture’s art, manners, morals, religion, language, and thought.

Thus, the ancient Greeks comprised a culture of which the separate city-states were subcultures whose schemata differed from one another less than they did from cultures outside of Greece—which all Greeks referred to as barbarian. On this view, women do not comprise a separate culture from men, though minorities do comprise subcultures within the larger culture, and tribes halfway around the world most assuredly comprise distinct cultures insofar as they have a unique way of looking at their world. It is precisely the differences among cultural schemata that lead many postmodernist thinkers to the conclusion that we must “privilege” difference—because differences cannot be bridged. But, once again, this is a half-truth. Giambattista Vico, who coined the term culture, reminded us long ago that despite the fact that human beings speak different languages, all human beings do use language. It is precisely the common use of language that allows us to begin, at least, to understand one another.

There are differences among cultures, to be sure, and these differences have led many to conclude that respect for cultural differences requires a non-critical attitude toward the practices of other cultures—regardless of how bizarre they happen to be. This may, in fact, be true of the vast majority of practices we find in other cultures, many of which seem odd or strange; but it is not necessarily true of all practices, some of which differ from others in important respects, as we shall see. The curious result of this approach, however, is that it has led many in our day to regard our own culture with a hypercritical eye, even as they look at other cultures through rose-colored glasses. This is a mistake. Criticism of this or that bizarre cultural practice may or may not be warranted; be that as it may, our critical faculties should be exercised with respect to all cultures and not simply restricted to Western civilization, the culture that is our own.

On the face of it, cultural relativism makes perfectly good sense. We are now aware of the incredible variety of cultural differences among the peoples of the world (though perhaps our awareness of cultural similarities has been unduly eclipsed), and we all wish to avoid “ethnocentrism,” or the view that our own culture is superior to others in every respect. We note, for ex-
ample, that one culture leaves the elderly out in freezing weather to die, while another relishes the presence of the elderly in the home to help raise children, and a third places the elderly in nursing homes where they will be comfortable, if isolated, in their old age. Cultural relativists acknowledge these differences and conclude that these customs are the result of enculturation; they insist that everyone is “entitled to his or her own opinion” as to whether or not any of these cultural practices is preferable to another. One mustn’t be “judgmental,” we are told. Any judgment about one culture from the perspective of another culture is ruled out of order, because, it is said, we are not of that culture. But is this conclusion warranted?

To be sure, if I judge the practices of another culture with respect to the elderly from the perspective of my own cultural practices, my cultural bias will obtrude. But this does not render it impossible to make sound judgments based on evidence and argumentation, since my judgment may not be simply a matter of cultural bias, and it may even be possible to eliminate bias altogether. Judgments are always perspectival, but one need only recognize the bias in one’s perspective to reduce it somewhat. This is the task of education, one would think, and it is a sign of an educated person that he or she recognizes and eliminates mere bias whenever it raises its ugly head. Once relatively free of bias, one might come to see that there are many good reasons why the practices of another culture are either acceptable or unacceptable on moral grounds. In saying this, I should note immediately that sound moral grounds are the only basis for cross-cultural criticism. Customs that are merely strange or peculiar from our point of view are not necessarily wrong. I may be put off or puzzled by the marriage practices of another culture, for example, but it is not clear that this constitutes any grounds for criticism. Some behaviors, on the other hand, raise profound moral questions and are deserving of careful scrutiny—and, perhaps, condemnation. Treatment of the elderly is a borderline case, so we might well begin with that.

If, for example, I come to realize that a given culture regards the elderly as a burden and this is why they leave the elderly out in sub-zero weather to freeze, I may also come to realize that this conviction rests upon fear, prejudice, or simply mistaken information about the “uselessness” of elderly people—a view that ignores, for example, the wisdom that comes with age and the invaluable aid the elderly can lend in raising the young and assisting them to avoid past mistakes. Accordingly, I may be justified in judging that particular cultural practice to be wrong-headed. If, however, the elderly consent to this treatment, it is not clear that such a practice is morally wrong. At the heart of every moral judgment lies a nest of facts that can be addressed in a reasonable manner. And while these facts will not entail by themselves a moral judgment—they cannot—they can certainly support, or fail to support, that judgment.

Thus, we are on much more solid ground when we judge the Nazis to have been wrong to persecute the Jews based on misinformation about racial superiority and inferiority. We now know, for example, that the notion of “Aryan racial supremacy” was biologically untenable. Similarly, many of the “scientific” treatises written in the nineteenth century to “prove” that blacks were inferior to whites on the grounds of cranial capacity were bogus—from a scientific standpoint. Cranial capacity has nothing to do with intelligence. And yet this “fact” was widely used to justify oppression of blacks in the American South. In addition to facts that can, or cannot, be substantiated to assist us in gaining a perspective on
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an action, there are certain fundamental moral values involved in the latter case as well.

The move from different marriage practices to treatment of the elderly to persecution of those different from ourselves is complex. And the reasoning here, as Pascal saw so clearly, must combine both discursive and intuitive thinking; such thinking is not exact and precise, but it can yield plausible conclusions. Furthermore, the grounds for criticism are firmer as we proceed. Michael Walzer has shown us where to draw the line. In his book, *Thick and Thin*, Walzer defends the view that there is a core morality that all humans instinctively defend, regardless of cultural bias. He calls this “thin (or ‘minimal’) morality,” and it includes fundamental principles of justice and human rights. According to Walzer, regardless of our cultural bias, and whether or not we can articulate these principles, all human beings recoil at the sight of injustice or the denial of human rights, wherever they may occur.

Surely this is correct, and just as surely, this provides a basis for cross-cultural value judgments. These grounds are precisely the same as the grounds we seek for moral judgments within our own culture as well. This is important to note, because any attempt to undermine relativism must provide critical grounds that operate within any culture while also seeking to go beyond the restricted boundaries of cultural bias. From the perspective of the wider culture, one can come to a cross-cultural judgment that racial persecution is wrong in another culture even if one does not happen to be a member of that particular culture. As the Marxist critic Terry Eagleton (of all people) has noted in this regard, cultural relativism leaves “itself with no more reason why we should resist fascism [for example] than the feebly pragmatic plea that fascism is not the way we do things in Sussex or Sacramento.” Indeed, in Eagleton’s view, postmodern theorists have “produced...an enervating and a paralyzing skepticism, and unseated the sovereignty of Western Man, in theory at least, by means of a full-blooded cultural relativism which is powerless to defend either Western or Eastern Woman [for example] against degrading social practices.”

Cultural relativism is an absurd view, and no one takes it seriously in his or her actual practice. That is to say, despite our theoretical commitment to be tolerant of others, no one is open to every other point of view, and no one would hesitate, in practice, to condemn another (regardless of that person’s cultural background) for activities they regard as morally offensive. It is this practical fact that has so frequently required our contemporary cultural relativists to construct fantastic and fabulously positive accounts of the value systems of other cultures—otherwise, they could not themselves avoid coming, sometimes, to condemnation.

I hasten to note, however, that the view I am defending does not imply any suggestion of cultural superiority, *per se*. It does not suggest that one culture is superior or inferior to another, because it does not consider cultures as wholes. Rather, it focuses attention upon specific practices that violate the fundamental principles of “thin” morality. The judgment that one’s own culture is somehow superior to another leads us directly to ethnocentrism, which certainly must be avoided. The view defended here, however, *does* suggest that any specific practice as found within any given culture, at any given moment, might be subject to criticism on rational grounds as violating fundamental principles of justice and human rights. Injustice and lack of respect for the dignity of persons (which is the foundation of human rights) are wrong wherever they are found.

Thus, the same line of reasoning that
leads me to conclude that the Nazis were wrong to persecute the Jews would also lead me to conclude, within my own culture, that Southern segregationists were wrong to oppress blacks. Reasoning about morality cannot be culture-bound, and any criticisms of another culture that are sound, especially those based on “minimal” morality, must also apply pari passu to one’s own culture.

The converse is also true: criticisms of actions that would be violations of minimal morality within one’s own culture must also apply to other cultures as well. Thus, the practice of Suttee, foot binding, imprisonment without trial, enslavement, and torture (as among the Iroquois) are all unacceptable on moral grounds—in any culture, at any time. The view that is gaining in popularity these days, that all other cultures are somehow superior to our own—a sort of ethnocentrism in reverse, if you will—is, at the very least, inconsistent. If it is wrong to violate the dignity of the human person in our own culture, as it surely is, then it is wrong in any culture whatever. This is true, whether or not it is recognized as wrong by those within a particular cultural group.

If an action is found to be wrong on moral grounds, then that judgment is binding whether or not it is agreed upon by even a majority of those who find the practice acceptable. Moral judgments that are firmly grounded on sound principles are “true” to the extent that we are able at present to judge. This means they are true, for anyone, unless or until they can be shown to be false. They are not true because they reflect the values of our own culture, but they are true because they are supported by evidence and critical judgment.

The cultural relativist, of course, denies that the term “true” can be used in the context of ethics. Value judgments simply reflect the opinions and attitudes of the people within a particular social grouping. The concern here, which I share, is to avoid absolutism, or the conviction that one has the Truth about what is and is not right. But the view defended here is not absolutist in this sense: no one claims to have the whole Truth about ethical matters. Rather, this view seeks to keep open lines of inquiry and to maintain a critical stance toward ethical claims. It is, in a word, an adaptation of the Socratic maieutic: one maintains that a proposition is true if, and only if, that proposition can be defended against criticism. If it cannot be defended, it must be abandoned. If it can be defended, then it is “true” to the extent that we now know—subject to continuous further review. This view is hardly dogmatic, and the very opposite of intolerant, as is often charged.

Cultural relativism is myopic because values, and the reasons that ground those values, are not simply relative to time and place. The situation is, as I have tried to show, considerably more complicated than this. To see this from another vantage point, if values were relative to specific cultures we might ask how it is possible to explain the phenomenon of extraordinary people who have been critical of their own culture—people such as Socrates, Christ, the Bud-
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dha, and the Hebrew prophets. Socrates held that one ought not to harm anyone, friend or foe, because in doing so one harms himself much more seriously. This claim followed upon Socrates’ convictions about the nature of the human soul. So far as we know, no one in the Greek world had ever held that view before, as no one before Christ taught that one should forgive his enemies and turn the other cheek.

Furthermore, we might ask, what culture does one belong to? Even in Plato’s day an urban, sophisticated thinker who was aware of views held in other cultures, especially a thinker who traveled, might be said to be the product of several cultures. This is especially true today when a young woman might grow up in a working-class Iowa home, attend college at an elite East Coast college, spend years working in Europe, convert from one religious denomination to another, and belong to several clubs made up of men and women not at all like herself. What exactly is her culture? If it is said that, qua woman, she belongs to a culture of half the world’s population, we must question how this can be regarded as a distinct culture. Aren’t the differences between a Maori woman and an American woman far greater than their similarities?

Be that as it may, one cannot explain how it is that we hold the values we do on the grounds that these values are simply handed down to us through the mysterious process of enculturation. Each of us is more than simply the product of his or her culture, whichever culture one happens to choose. And as beings capable of reason, we are all able to follow the reasoning that supports, or fails to support, value judgments. Reasoning is capable of laying bare the basis of value judgments, displaying the fundamental principles involved, and disclosing our judgments as well founded or groundless. If a judgment rests on error, confusion, bias, narrowness of vision, or sheer stupidity (all of which are human characteristics) then it ought to be abandoned—no matter how dearly it is held by ourselves or others in our own culture.

To be sure, it is difficult for human beings to abandon views dearly held, but that has nothing to do with the question of whether or not we ought to abandon a view when it has been shown to be untenable. The segregationist who holds that blacks are inferior will probably continue to believe that even after the philosopher has shown him that his position is untenable. This is a problem in abnormal psychology, not philosophy. What is happening on a wide scale in the American university, however, is that young people are learning to adopt a critical stance toward their own culture on the grounds that it is responsible for most of the evil in the world, without considering the grounds for that stance or seeking a balanced viewpoint that would also consider the immense benefits Western civilization has bequeathed to the world—for all its failings. The view of our “culture studies” mavens is no more balanced or reasonable than is the view of the segregationist; it is simply more fashionable in academic circles these days.

The fundamental error of cultural relativism, then, is that those who hold it confuse part of the truth for the whole truth. Persons are enculturated, to be sure, but persons are capable of reasoning, and as such are able to rise above cultural boundaries to make value judgments based on facts, basic values, and cogent argumentation. That a given culture holds to a view does not make that view true. Whether or not it is true can only be determined by sifting the reasons that support that view through the critical faculties to see whether or not they can withstand scrutiny. Those reasons that can withstand criticism are held to be true until or unless they are found to be false later on. This may be as close to
the truth as we humans can get, but it is much closer than the relativist doggerel that reduces truth to mere opinion.

The alternative to cultural relativism is not absolutism, as many have maintained. To say that values are not mere opinions is not to say that they are unchanging, eternal standards that are known only to a handful of extraordinary individuals. The alternative, rather, is objectivism, the view that values are objective in the sense that they do not depend upon those who make value judgments in any way, though our grasp of these values is always partial and tenuous. I have examined this view in some detail in another place, but it might be appropriate to give a brief overview of the position here.

Values are qualities or features of our inter-subjective world that “require” approval. To reduce values to approval, as the relativist would, is to ignore the fact that the approval is brought about by virtue of a distinctive quality of features in our common world that contributes to our world’s richness and variety. As John Mullen has said in this regard, “We can observe Mother Teresa’s goodness [for example] with our own eyes. As we observe her caring actions, we are observing her goodness. Observation plays a crucial role in value claims. It makes perfectly good sense to say, in the presence of her ministering to the poor, ‘Look at what a good person she is, you can see it with your own eyes.” What Mullen is talking about, of course, is the intuitive aspect of Pascal’s “two-minded” approach to reasoning. Intuition, for Pascal, is combined with discursive thought (esprit géométrique) to allow us to reason about complex moral issues. We “see” Mother Teresa’s goodness, but we are also able to reason to it from basic ethical principles, or values, and the facts we collect when we observe her behavior in the presence of those who suffer. Pascal, the mathematician and devout Christian, saw more clearly than most how the heart and mind must work together in our search for truth.

The quality of a given event is valuable, not the approval that is attendant upon it. If, for example, honesty is valuable in the sense that it “requires” a positive response (i.e., we approve of honest actions and judge them to be “good”), then honesty, like Mother Teresa’s goodness, is a characteristic feature of our world that all ought to recognize and espouse—whether or not they do so in fact. Honesty, like any other value, is systemically related to other features of our world such that attention to those other features frequently opens us to the “requiredness” of the value itself. We see a man give the dropped wallet back to its owner and those events lead us to acknowledge the value of honesty, which we admire and approve. Honesty has a gestalt quality that “requires” recognition by those able and willing to open themselves to it—not in the way that the I.R.S. requires our check every year, but in the sense of logical necessity.

Honesty may not always be called for in a given situation (absolutism), but it is always a good thing. And most importantly, if it is the right thing to do in this situation—to return the wallet—then it is the right thing to do in any similar situation. In a marginal case in which one might lie to spare another’s feelings, or obviously, to save the life of a friend, honesty may not be called for. In fact, it might be wrong to tell the truth. The situation will reveal to us the relationship of one value (honesty in this case) to others (care for others, for example), and experience and thought will direct us to the conclusion as to which value ought to be adhered to in a particular case. But whatever we decide to do in a specific case, honesty continues to be a value: it is a good thing to be honest. In a particular case, however, it might be better not to be
honest, because honesty is in conflict with, say, concern for the life of another human being.

The hint of situational relativism in this example is not pernicious, because the situation does not determine the value; it merely makes it possible for us to become aware of the value and its relation to other values in the same situation. Values themselves are not situational, despite the fact that our awareness of them happens to be. Attention must be turned to the values in the situation that confronts us, and not to the situation in isolation, or our personal reaction to the situation. This is a difficult thing to ask in an age in which consciousness is inverted and we are preoccupied with our own reactions to the world rather than to the world itself. But it is necessary if we are to make sense of our moral life.

Objectivism in ethics entails the claim that values are features of our common world and that the reasons we give in defending our value judgments draw attention to those values either directly or by way of other features of our world that are related systemically to those values. Our reasons also try to show the relationship among values. For instance, in our previous example, our reasons try to show that honesty is entailed by the “thin” moral principle of respect for persons—in that we would not lie to or deceive persons who are deserving of respect, and keeping the wallet ourselves is a form of deception. Our reasons also try to draw attention to features of the event itself—the spontaneity of the action, the implications of the finder’s keeping the wallet himself, etc. Reasoning in this manner leads us to the conclusion that the right thing to do in this case is to return the wallet. In this way, our ethical judgments can be argued, defended, and if need be rejected on rational grounds that are binding across cultural boundaries.

Ethical judgments cannot always be simply a matter of one person’s opinion at a particular moment—though they may be much of the time, for those who do not think much about right and wrong. As long as attention is focused on the values present in the situation itself (and not our personal reaction to that situation) we can discuss the question of the truth or falsity of the value judgment in a meaningful way. Cultural relativism does not allow for this kind of give and take, because the view reduces values to our reactions to situations, simply. That is, cultural relativism reduces values to the opinions and feelings of particular people at a particular time and place. But this sort of reduction is simplistic in the extreme. This is why cultural relativism is truly an absurd view: it reduces situations to a particular person’s “take” on that situation. If one adopts this position, then there is really no point in discussing differences of opinion about what is and what is not valuable: there is no moral high ground.

Admittedly, though, there are elements of “absolutism” in the objectivist view. Honesty, for example, is always a good thing even when it must be avoided in the presence of a greater good—as when we lie to save a friend’s life. Thus, while objectivism smacks at times of absolutism, which is unpalatable to the postmodernist temper, it admits that our grasp of values is never absolute. We can never be certain that we are right when we make value judgments. In this way objectivism avoids the pitfall of absolutism and the specter of imperialism that so bothered Michael Walzer.

In short, the view suggested here does not lead to dogmatism. It rests on the knowledge that our claims in ethics are corrigible. But it insists that, in principle at least, there are correct and incorrect value judgments, and it invites those who differ to engage in dialogue. This invitation cannot be ex-
tended by the cultural relativist, of course, since if values are relative to cultures, then there is really nothing to talk about. One simply notes that the Taliban, for example, deny women their basic human rights, at least as we see them, and one leaves it at that. Or one reads that young Palestinian men and women drape themselves in explosives, walk into a crowded restaurant, and blow up themselves and a dozen men, women, and children. And then one hesitates to be “judgmental”! It is ironic in this regard that those who embrace cultural relativism seek to avoid a position they regard as intolerant only to fall into a position that closes the door to open dialogue and the reasonable resolution of moral differences.

Our values and the reasons we have for espousing those values are not necessarily relative to our culture, to our place and time. Values can be discussed, compared, rejected, or displaced, as can our reasons for holding them. They are objective or real, and while our grasp of them is tentative and is most assuredly affected by cultural considerations, it is not determined by those considerations. Values are not culturally relative. Such a view is myopic and ignores what is most interesting, what is most important, and what is most valuable about the diversity of cultures.