

The Problem for Normative Cultural Relativism

JOHN J. TILLEY*

Abstract. The key problem for normative (or moral) cultural relativism arises as soon as we try to formulate it. It resists formulations that are (1) clear, precise, and intelligible; (2) plausible enough to warrant serious attention; and (3) faithful to the aims of leading cultural relativists, one such aim being to produce an important alternative to moral universalism. Meeting one or two of these conditions is easy; meeting all three is not. I discuss twenty-four candidates for the label “cultural relativism,” showing that not one meets all three conditions. In the end I conclude that cultural relativists have produced nothing that threatens universalism.

The term “cultural relativism” has many uses; in this essay I use it for the normative (or moral) theory that goes by that name, and often shorten it to “relativism.” Critical discussions of relativism normally start with a formulation of it, and then assess either the theory itself or the chief arguments for it. Although this procedure is useful in many ways (see Tilley 1998a), it fails to pinpoint the key problem for relativism. That problem does not arise *after* the theory has been formulated; it occurs before the starting gate ever opens. The problem is that it’s difficult (perhaps impossible) to formulate relativism so that *all* of the following are true of it:

- It is reasonably clear, precise, and intelligible.
- It is plausible enough to warrant serious attention.
- It is faithful to the aims of leading cultural relativists (especially Sumner 1906; Benedict 1934a, 1934b; Herskovits 1948, 1973), meaning at least three things: first, it contributes significantly to moral theory; second, it involves a tacit rejection of, and a substitute for, intuitionism, Kantianism, and the other moral views it was meant to rival; and third, it’s a *cultural* brand of moral relativism, a brand that ties morality to elements of culture (e.g., customs) as opposed, say, to personal likes and dislikes.

* I thank IUPUI for a sabbatical leave which aided the preparation of this paper.

For convenience, I will refer to these items as the *clarity condition* (C), the *plausibility condition* (P), and the *faithfulness condition* (F).

I will say nothing about the third component of (F), but it will lurk in the background as I proceed. It limits, in an appropriate way, the class of views to be discussed. After all, one can neither refute nor establish *cultural* relativism by discussing a relativism of an entirely different stripe.¹

Nor will I say much about the theories mentioned in the second part of (F). I will assume acquaintance with such theories, and take for granted that they are prime examples of *universalism*. According to universalism, some moral judgments are transculturally valid, where "valid" means, not "believed" or "complied with," but something akin to "true" or "correct." (Indeed, I will use "true" from here on.)² If a given thesis does not rule out this view of moral judgments, it is not a brand of cultural relativism.

Items (C), (P), and (F) are reasonable criteria to use in assessing formulations of relativism. For instance, any formulation that fails to meet the first part of condition (F)—that is, any formulation that results in a thesis lacking the feature mentioned in that part³—is inadequate. Relativism purports to be an *ethical* theory; so we can ignore any view that makes no important difference in that area.

Although it is easy to meet one or two of the above criteria, it is not easy to meet all three. I will show this by discussing several candidates for the label "cultural relativism," not one of which meets all the criteria. This is worth doing, for two reasons. First, relativism has undergone a revival lately, especially in fields concerning international ethics (see, for example, Renteln 1990; for challenges to the revival consult Nussbaum 1992; Howard 1993; Bayefsky 1996; Zechenter 1997). This stems, in part, from underappreciating the problems that plague cultural relativism. Second, the critical approach taken here is a useful alternative to the common one of arguing that relativism is implausible. The latter approach can mislead people. The term "cultural relativism" is a convenient label for many familiar views, some of which are both plausible and morally important. The trouble is that when these views are pinned down, the plausible ones are not at odds with traditional brands of universalism. (Indeed, they are not even full-fledged ethical theories.) This comes to light in what follows.

¹ Two examples: the brand of moral relativism defended in Harman 1975; and the brand commonly known as "subjectivism." I have addressed the first of these views in Tilley 1988; the second in Tilley 1998b.

² In Tilley 1998a I have explicated the term "valid moral judgment" in a way that employs the notion of truth but does not make validity *equivalent* to truth. This explication would merely lengthen and complicate the present paper.

³ I'll feel free to alternate between two ways of speaking: "Thesis X lacks feature (F)"; and "Formulation X fails to meet condition (F)." Strictly speaking, these expressions differ in meaning. But I trust that no confusion will result.

1.

One candidate for the label “cultural relativism” is this:

- What is right in one culture is wrong in others. There are no absolute moral standards that are transculturally binding.

Although not a quotation, this statement is typical of the formulations found in ethics texts. Unless it is conjoined with plenty of clarification, it fails to meet condition (C). Consider its initial sentence. Does that sentence tell us that right and wrong vary with circumstances, which in turn vary with culture? Or does it tell us that what is right in one culture is wrong in others, even when the circumstances are the same? And what about the second sentence—does it add to the first one or simply reword it? If it adds to it, what exactly does it add? That is, what exactly are moral “standards” (are they rules? principles?), and what is it for them to be “binding”? And what’s the difference between a standard that’s transculturally binding and an *absolute* standard that’s transculturally binding? Is the word “absolute” superfluous? If not, what does it mean?

The problem discussed here afflicts many other formulations of relativism, including these:

- “Ethnocentrism is one side of a coin. On the other side is ... *cultural relativism* ... [which] challenge[s] the idea of abstract and unchanging standards of good and bad.” (Downs 1975, 34f.)
- “Evaluations are *relative* to the cultural background out of which they arise.” (Herskovits 1948, 63. See also Herskovits 1973, 14; and Herskovits 1955, 350.)

Does the first item in this pair tell us that relativism is simply the rejection of ethnocentrism? If so, why add the part about abstract and unchanging standards of good and bad? (Is ethnocentrism no different from the belief that such standards are possible?) And what exactly is an *abstract* standard of good and bad? The author of the statement does not tell us.

The second statement is equally puzzling. Does it tell us that evaluations are *influenced* by their cultural background, or that they are *true* depending on that background? And what does the author mean by an “evaluation”? Is the judgment, (a) “Polyandry is right for the western Pahari” an evaluation? If so, and if we take the statement we are examining to mean that evaluations are *true* depending on the cultural background from which they arise, then the truth of (a) is relative to *our* cultural background, because it’s *our* judgment about the Pahari. But this conflicts with many remarks made by the author of the proposed formulation of relativism. Those remarks suggest that (a) is true relative to the *Pahari’s* cultural background (see, e.g., Herskovits 1973, 12f., 48, 88). Should we reject the author’s formulation of relativism as

a spurious remark? No, he states it in more than one place (see the citation). So we are left with a puzzle, and the author says little that would help us solve it.

In sum, many formulations of relativism are neither clear as they stand nor sufficiently clarified by accompanying remarks. This is a serious flaw. We cannot decide whether to accept a thesis if we cannot pin down its meaning.

2.

The next seven candidates are these:

- “Morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits. Mankind has always preferred to say, ‘It is morally good,’ rather than ‘It is habitual,’ [...] but historically the two phrases are synonymous” (Benedict 1934a, 73).
- “‘Immoral’ never means anything but contrary to the mores of the time and place. [...] The mores can make anything right” (Sumner 1906, §§ 439, 572).
- “The notion of right is in the folkways. It is not outside of them, of independent origin, and brought to them to test them. In the folkways, whatever is, is right. [...] When we come to the folkways we are at the end of our analysis” (Sumner 1906, § 31).
- “Righteousness, good manners, fashion—they are all one. [...] The first step in an understanding of the genesis of styles must be the realization that no absolute standard of esthetic excellence anywhere exists; and the first step in an understanding of morality also must be the recognition of the same complete nonexistence of any standard of righteousness that is not wholly a matter of tradition, custom, transitory vogue” (Ayres 1929, 11, 15).
- “Morals are [...] simply the more durable mores, the mores which that particular culture deems most important [...] Mores, therefore, define what is right [...]. And the authority of mores is simply that they exist. [...] They possess no transcultural validity” (Wheelis 1958, 95).
- *Agent relativism*: Moral judgments that positively assess an action—for example, “That was morally right”; “It would be morally appropriate for Rahele to assist Leila”—are true if and only if the action accords with the cultural norms (= socially approved habits) of the agent who performs the action. By the same token, moral judgments that negatively assess an action are true if and only if the action conflicts with the cultural norms of the relevant agent.
- *Appraiser relativism*: If a person makes a positive moral judgment about an action or an action-type—for instance, by asserting “What Hedio did was morally good” or “Cannibalism is morally OK”—her judgment is true if and only if the action accords with the norms of her culture. If she makes

a negative moral judgment about the action, her judgment is true if and only if the action conflicts with the norms of her culture.

The first five of these views are included because they are familiar to many readers. But there is no need to discuss them; we can pass on to the final two.⁴ This is because the first five are shorthand for one of those two (or something closely akin to them), and the latter are superior to the first five in precision and clarity. If agent relativism and appraiser relativism are inadequate as formulations of relativism, so are the other theses in the list.

And indeed, agent relativism and appraiser relativism are inadequate. Before showing this, however, let's be clear on how the two differ. Suppose the norms of Chen's culture differ from those of Ruth's. Suppose also that Ruth is doing something that accords with the norms of her culture, but not with those of Chen's. Chen states that Ruth's deed is wrong. According to appraiser relativism, Chen's statement is true because the deed he is evaluating conflicts with the norms of his culture. But according to agent relativism, Chen's statement is false because the evaluated deed accords with the norms of the agent's culture, the agent being Ruth.

Neither thesis has feature (P). (The criticisms that follow have benefited from Stace 1937; Schmidt 1955; and Shaw 1981.) To see this about agent relativism, imagine a culture in which the norms require each family to drown its first-born child. These norms did not evolve willy-nilly. They grew up, and remain current, owing to the belief that the frequency of plagues can be diminished only by drowning first-born children. This custom causes great misery, but those who practice it see it as a necessary evil. Now suppose one of these people devotes herself to the study of disease, and finds that drowning first-born children does nothing to reduce the frequency of plagues. According to agent relativism, this person should dismiss her discovery as *irrelevant* to the morality of drowning first-born children. The rightness of a deed is determined by the *norms* of the agent's culture; it has nothing to do with the origins of those norms or their rationale. Perhaps the norms derive from errors about the consequences of what the norms prescribe, but according to agent relativism this makes no difference to the rightness or wrongness of violating those norms.

This implication of agent relativism is absurd. If a moral evaluation of a practice stems, however indirectly, from errors about the consequences of the practice, the correction of those errors is surely relevant to subsequent thinking about the morality of the practice.

A second implication of agent relativism is that we can resolve ethical disputes by taking a poll or in some other way uncovering the local norms. This is false. If we find two Alaskans arguing about whether it would be

⁴ The names I have chosen for these two are borrowed from Lyons 1976. He uses the terms "agent's-group relativism" and "appraiser's-group relativism." I should also note, to prevent confusion, that the term "agent relativism" has multiple uses in moral theory.

right for them to go herring fishing, it's useless to tell them that such fishing agrees with the norms of their culture. They already know that; their dispute concerns something else.

A third problem for agent relativism is that it makes trouble for the notion of moral reform. Imagine a culture in which the norms prescribe racial discrimination, and a member of that culture who tries to reform it by peacefully resisting the oppressive norms and inspiring others to do likewise. If agent relativism is true, this person is not a reformer but a wrongdoer, for his deeds conflict with the norms of his culture. The problem, obviously, is that it's hard to see him as a wrongdoer; he seems clearly to be a reformer.

A related problem is that agent relativism can be used to condone extreme intolerance of other cultures. (This is especially a problem for agent relativists who recommend their theory as an *antidote* to intolerance.) Imagine a culture in which such intolerance is the norm. In this culture, it is customary to show contempt for the norms of neighboring societies and do things that disrupt those norms. Often this behavior becomes violent; its aim is to disrupt the offending lifestyles by destroying the societies in which they occur. According to agent relativism, this violent behavior is right in the imagined culture; the opposite behavior is wrong.

Appraiser relativism is no more plausible than agent relativism. It implies, absurdly, that Juan does not necessarily contradict himself if he says to Yoko, "When you say that abortion is morally right, what you say is perfectly true. Nevertheless, abortion is not morally right." (See Harrison 1971, 230; also 120f.) Perhaps Juan's culture differs from Yoko's, and abortion agrees with the norms of Yoko's culture but not with those of Juan's. If so, to accept appraiser relativism is to imply that Juan's comment to Yoko is not only logically flawless but true. The trouble, of course, is that Juan's comment is not logically flawless; it is plainly contradictory.

A second absurd consequence of appraiser relativism is that to morally criticize the norms of one's culture is always silly. For what is it to morally criticize those norms if not to judge that many of the deeds that accord with them are wrong? But given appraiser relativism, to judge those deeds as wrong is to judge falsely, given that the norms with which they accord are the norms of one's own culture.

An equally implausible consequence of appraiser relativism is that if we find scrawled on a wall the statement, "Torturing people for recreation is morally good," we can form no intelligent opinion about the statement's truth unless we first locate the person who scrawled it. For only then can we determine whether recreational torture accords with the cultural norms of the person who produced the statement.

In sum, agent relativism and appraiser relativism are grossly implausible. Their chief flaw is that they assert a skin-tight connection between moral judgments and cultural norms. This is a flaw because no such connection exists. This observation, by the way, did not have to await twentieth century

examinations of relativism. It was made by social scientists well before Sumner wrote *Folkways*. For example, we find it in William James' *Principles of Psychology* in 1890:

Rightness is not *mere* usualness, wrongness not *mere* oddity, however numerous the facts which might be invoked to prove such identity. Nor are the moral judgments those most invariably and emphatically impressed on us by public opinion. The most characteristically and peculiarly moral judgments that a man is ever called on to make are in unprecedented cases and lonely emergencies, where no popular rhetorical maxims can avail, and the hidden oracle alone can speak; and it speaks often in favor of conduct quite unusual, and suicidal as far as gaining popular approbation goes. (James 1890, 2: 672.)

A possible reply to all this is that we can formulate relativism without specifying either the aspect of culture to which moral judgments are connected or the exact nature of the connection. For example, we can adopt William Frankena's (1973, 109) formulation:⁵

- "What is right or good for one [culture] is not right or good for another, even if the situations involved are similar, meaning not merely that what is thought right or good by one is not thought right or good by another ..., but what is really right or good in the one case is not so in another."

This statement leaves the precise connection between morality and culture unspecified, and hence allows different relativists to forge the connection in different ways. Perhaps some can do so without implying a skin-tight connection between moral truth and cultural norms, habits, traditions and the like; hence they can sidestep the objections that undermine agent relativism and appraiser relativism.

One problem with this reply is obvious. When different relativists set out "to forge the connection in different ways" they are likely to meet with the same problems that made trouble for agent and appraiser relativism. (It's no objection to this to say that "perhaps" they can avoid those problems.) We have no proof of this, of course, but only because the above formulation of relativism is devoid of any information—of any hints, even—about the elements of culture to which morality is purportedly connected, and about the logical nature of the connection. But even if we have no proof of our claim, we have some evidence for it. The evidence is this: We have examined the two most natural ways to forge the relativist's link between morality and culture—namely, the ways proposed by agent and appraiser relativists—and we have found them to yield absurdities. Hence we possess evidence

⁵ Two comments: First, my criticisms of the thesis expressed by this formulation should not be taken as criticisms of Frankena. He is not a proponent of the thesis. Second, what I have to say (and what I just said) about this thesis applies (*mutatis mutandis*) to many others, including the one in Paul Schmidt's well-known discussion of relativism: "There can be no value judgments that are true, that is, objectively justifiable, independent of specific cultures." (Schmidt 1955, 782.)

that the view expressed by Frankena's formulation is ultimately undermined by those same absurdities. (What undermines the ways of fleshing out a schema indirectly undermines the schema itself.) If cultural relativists wish to challenge this claim, they must *do the work* of fleshing out Frankena's formulation in a way that avoids all the absurdities, keeping in mind that the resulting thesis must meet conditions (C) and (F) as well as (P). In short, at this point the burden of proof is on the relativist.

A second problem with the reply is this: Although the view expressed by Frankena's formulation is uninformative in the ways mentioned, it is informative enough for us to see that it lacks plausibility. It implies that the judgment, "It's morally right to breathe occasionally" does not extend to all cultures. So in some cultures it is not right to breathe, even occasionally!

It will not do for the relativist to say: "Your criticism is effective only because it concerns a judgment that is not the least bit contentious. I grant that the judgment about breathing is universally true, but I maintain that it makes no real trouble for relativism." To say this is to make an enormous concession. For if even one judgment of the form "It's morally right to \emptyset " is universally true, there is nothing about moral judgments *per se* that prevents them from being universally true. So perhaps *many* such judgments are universally true, including many contentious ones. Those who seek to identify such judgments can proceed with their work, ignoring any naysaying from relativists.

3.

The next two candidates are suggested by these remarks:

Every attempt to win an outside standpoint [independent of a set of mores] from which to reduce the whole to an absolute philosophy of truth and right [...] is a delusion. [...] There is no permanent or universal standard by which right and truth [...] can be established and different folkways compared and criticised. (Sumner 1906, §§ 232, 439)

No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking. Even in his philosophical probings he cannot go behind these stereotypes [...]. (Benedict 1934b, 2)

The force of the enculturative experience channels all judgments. [...] There is no way to play this game of making judgments across cultures except with loaded dice. [...] It is well enough to speak [...] of [...] "objective reality, independent of the observer." This may exist, but in terms of the framework of our knowledge of the psychocultural processes of enculturation, the relativist can only [...] pose his basic query: "Whose objective reality?" (Herskovits 1973, 56, 58)

These passages seem to say that all cognitions are hopelessly biased owing to our enculturation, or that all truth—moral, scientific, and so on—is

culturally relative. Thus, to the extent that they suggest ways of formulating relativism, they suggest identifying that view with one of the following:

- *Cultural determinism*: All our beliefs, concepts, and perceptions are culturally conditioned to such an extent that unbiased thoughts, choices, and inferences are impossible.
- *Total relativism*: Every truth is a *local* truth, meaning that it's true for, or within, one of a myriad of incommensurable, but equally rational, frameworks of belief. Furthermore, these frameworks vary with culture. So no true assertion, moral or nonmoral, has any rational purchase on those whose cultural background puts them beyond the framework to which the assertion is relative.

The first thesis differs from the second one because it says nothing about truth. It comports with the view that some truths are more than just "local" truths. It also says nothing about ethics, and contradicts no version of universalism. For that reason we can dismiss it; it lacks feature (F).

Some relativists will object that this is too quick. They will say that although cultural determinism does not contradict universalistic moral theories, it surely discredits them, by showing them to be culturally biased.

The weakness of this objection resides in the word "biased." The fact that a thesis is culturally biased discredits the thesis only if "biased" means roughly the same as "distorted" or "mistaken."⁶ But if it has that meaning, cultural determinism fails to meet condition (P), for two reasons. First, cultural determinism is unsupported by the evidence marshaled for it, because according to cultural determinism, such evidence is not *evidence* at all, but a batch of mistakes or distortions. Second, cultural determinism refutes itself, for it implies that every product of the human mind is discredited, including cultural determinism.

The second thesis, total relativism, lacks features (F) and (C). It lacks (F) for two reasons. First, appearances notwithstanding, cultural relativists do not embrace total relativism. This is true even of Herskovits, who is often interpreted as a total relativist. In one place he says that "science, a unique mode of reaching objectively ascertainable truth ... can survive only in a social order ... capable of cultural transcendence" (1948, 76). In another he says that "technology is ... susceptible of objective evaluation" (1948, 241). And in one of his essays (1945) he talks of cultural patterns being "viewed objectively" rather than in ways that "distort reality" (158), and speaks confidently of "objective analysis" (143, 158), "objective proofs" (154), "objectively correct" answers (164), "objective data" (166), and "self-evident

⁶ Suppose, for instance, that a thesis counts as biased if questions, interests, or assumptions shared by only some of the world's cultures contributed to its genesis. Then no doubt is cast on the thesis by showing it to be biased. The Pythagorean theorem is biased in this sense, but it's not implausible on that account.

principle[s]" (168). This is not the sort of talk that comes naturally to a total relativist. Indeed, it reveals that at bottom Herskovits is *not* a total relativist.

Second, total relativism refutes none of the theories cultural relativism was meant to replace, including this one: "Universalism is true." In fact, to accept total relativism is to abandon the hope of refuting or establishing anything. This is because total relativism applies to itself and to anything derived from it. Given total relativism, the following three views cannot command the assent of anyone outside the relevant frameworks: (1) total relativism is true; (2) if total relativism is true, universalism must be rejected; and (3) universalism must be rejected. So total relativism does not threaten universalism.⁷

Note, by the way, that (3) is not redundant. If total relativism is true, then relative to some frameworks, (3) is false even if (1) and (2) are true. Relative to those frameworks, it's false that if p entails q , and p is true, then q is true. We must be careful here, of course. Given total relativism, everything said in this paragraph—including the claim that it says something—is false for most frameworks. Or is it? Obviously, it all depends on our framework—unless, of course, our framework is one that makes it false that it all depends on our framework. But watch out. If total relativism is true, the preceding caveat is not true for all frameworks. Nor, for that matter, is the one just stated. Or is it? It all depends ...

No doubt these remarks are perplexing. The problem is not with the remarks, but with total relativism. To reflect on that thesis is to lose our grip on it, which means that it's not fully intelligible. It lacks feature (C).

But let's return to my second claim about total relativism. That claim, again, is that given total relativism, statements (1) through (3) cannot command the assent of anyone outside the relevant frameworks; so total relativism fails to threaten universalism. Suppose the proponent of total relativism contends that my claim stands refuted because every assertion, including mine, is at best a *relative* truth. Then insofar as his contention has force, it refutes itself, in which case it has no force.

Suppose, on the other hand, that he claims that our belief-framework is no different from his, and that relative to that framework, (3) is true. We can point out that we have seen no evidence for this claim. More important, according to his thesis any such evidence would be genuine *evidence* for just one framework. For all we know, that framework—call it F —differs from ours and from most others, including the one relative to which we are mistaken in thinking that F differs from ours, and the framework relative to which we are similarly mistaken about the framework just mentioned—the one relative to which we are mistaken in thinking that F differs from ours.

⁷ Nor will it do to exempt total relativism from what it says about other judgments. If one judgment is exempt from it, perhaps many are, including many moral ones.

Suppose, finally, that the total relativist claims that although universalism is an option for those outside the framework to which (3) is relative, those who share that framework cannot be faulted for rejecting universalism. We can reply that given total relativism, his claim is relative to a specific framework. And for all we know, that framework differs both from ours and from the one to which (3) is relative. Perhaps for the latter frameworks, it's false that those who share the framework to which (3) is relative cannot be faulted for rejecting universalism. It's worth adding that any evidence to the contrary is relative to a particular framework, which very likely differs not only from ours and the one to which (3) is relative, but from the framework relative to which we are mistaken in saying what we just said—namely, that for our framework and the one to which (3) is relative, it's false that those who share the framework to which (3) is relative cannot be faulted for rejecting universalism.

Once again, our discussion has become perplexing. Even so it confirms something, namely, the earlier point that total relativism cannot disprove anything, including universalism. To use total relativism for that purpose is neither to refute nor to support anything; it is merely to become mired in (literally) endless complications.⁸

4.

Thus far, we have seen thirteen formulations of relativism. The first three, those discussed in Section 1, fall short of condition (C). That is, their meaning is obscure or puzzling. The next eight, those covered in Section 2, result in views that are wildly implausible; hence they fail to meet condition (P). The remaining two formulations run afoul of condition (F), and one of them, total relativism, runs equally afoul of (C).

Faced with these problems, especially those that afflict the views covered in the last two sections, some relativists will say that they never meant to defend those views. Instead, they meant one of the following:

- *Methodological contextualism*: Every custom, belief, or action must be studied in light of the history and traditions, problems and opportunities, and total body of customs of the culture in which it occurs. Otherwise, we will gain no insight into other cultures.

⁸ From some quarters we can expect a fashionably "postmodern" response: "But we are not in the business of refuting or supporting things! We dismiss such activity as futile, and merely *invite* you to share the mood, the perspective, the intellectual style expressed by total relativism." One problem with this response is that we have no reason to accept the invitation it extends. (Those rebuffed by this statement should think twice about disputing it. To give reasons to accept an invitation is to enter the business of *supporting* things.) Also, total relativism implies that the statement, "We ... invite you to share the mood ... expressed by total relativism," is not true for all frameworks. Perhaps ours is one of those for which the statement is false, in which case we have not been invited to share the mood of total relativism.

- *Methodological neutralism*: To understand other cultures, social scientists must suppress their moral convictions when studying those cultures. Perhaps they cannot (and should not) entirely free themselves from such convictions, but they should try to put the convictions aside in the interest of accurate research.
- *Nondevelopmentalism*: It's false that the world's cultures are developing along the same path, and that they vary chiefly because some cultures are further down the path than others. The notion of a *single path of development*, with the world's cultures strung out along it like a gaggle of hikers, is useless to social science.
- *Descriptive relativism*: Different cultures accept different "moralities" or moral principles. For instance, the morality of the Yanomamö differs from that of the Inuit, which in turn differs from that of the Etoro.
- *Situational relativism*: Whether a deed is right or wrong depends on the situation in which it occurs; thus, moral appraisals must be sensitive to circumstances. It goes without saying that some of these circumstances are tied to culture. For instance, what counts as a joke in one society might count as an insult in another, owing to cultural differences between the societies.
- *Partial relativism*: Although there is a core of elements, some of them moral principles, shared by every defensible moral code, there also are *culturally specific* elements in such codes. These elements vary from one defensible code to the next. Unless we know these elements, we cannot understand the behavior of the people who accept the moral codes in which the elements occur.

These views are more plausible than those covered in sections 2 and 3, and are what many social scientists mean by "cultural relativism." (This is especially true of the first two views. For methodological contextualism see Nanda 1994, 17, 19; Hanson 1995, 66; Bodley 1997, 13f. For methodological neutralism see Hatch 1983, 11; Babbie 1988, 100ff.; Harris 1991, 10f.; Maybury-Lewis 1993, 18). And indeed, these scientists never meant to defend the views addressed in the preceding two sections. In particular, they never meant to advance a *moral* theory of any kind.⁹ In contrast to these authors, some advocates of the moral theory of cultural relativism think they can defend their thesis by adopting, or retreating into, one or more of the above six views. (A prime example is Downs 1975, chap. 2.) This is puzzling, especially in the case of the first four views, which clearly are not moral theories.

⁹ A possible exception is Richard Shweder. What I'm calling *partial relativism* is a paraphrase of his thesis in Shweder 1990. In addition to defending that thesis, Shweder lists some of the principles which, in his view, are likely to be part of any defensible moral code (212). But if this counts as advancing a moral theory, the theory in question is a brand of universalism. (To say this is not to criticize Shweder. His purpose is not to refute universalistic moral theories.)

At any rate, the above six theses are inadequate statements of cultural relativism. Perhaps they have features (C) and (P), but they lack feature (F). This is clearly true of the sixth thesis, which is actually a brand of universalism (see note 9). It is equally true of the first four views, which say nothing about moral truth, and dovetail with every major ethical theory. Consider descriptive relativism, for instance. Although it refers to moral principles, it concerns only the *acceptance* of the principles, not their truth. A principle can be accepted without being true, and it can be true, perhaps even transculturally true, without being accepted. So descriptive relativism is compatible with most moral theories, including universalistic ones.¹⁰ Such theories aim to tell us what is *true* in the way of ethics, not what is accepted.

The fifth thesis, situational relativism, has moral relevance, but it resembles descriptive relativism in being a truism which nearly every moral theory can accommodate. Most any moral principle, whether transculturally true or not, will yield different prescriptions in different circumstances. The principles, "An act is right just in case it produces at least as much happiness as would be produced by any available alternative," "An act is right just in case it complies with a rule which, if generally accepted, would maximize happiness," and many other moral principles, will rule out homicide in most situations, but in others permit it.

A predictable reply is that although situational and descriptive relativism are commonplace, and in that sense insignificant, they were far from commonplace in the days of Sumner and Benedict. Were it not for those and other relativists, moral thought would still be hampered by two old-fashioned assumptions. The first is that moral beliefs vary little around the world; the second is that variations in circumstances have no bearing on right and wrong. So we must not underrate the importance descriptive and situational relativism possessed at the time they emerged.

This reply is common enough to warrant more than passing attention. To assess it, let's assemble some remarks from well-known proponents of descriptive and situational relativism. First the proponents of situational relativism:

The limits of justice [...] may be altered by an alteration of circumstances; so that what at one time appears to be [our] duty [...] at another is altered and becomes quite the contrary. [...] Our duty is not always the same, but various, according to a variety of circumstances.

A thing taken in its primary sense [...] may be good or evil, and yet, when some additional circumstances are taken into account, by a consequent consideration may be changed into the contrary. Thus that a man should live is good [...], absolutely considered. But if in a particular case we add that a man is a murderer or dangerous to society, to kill him is a good; that he live is an evil.

¹⁰ Likewise, nondevelopmentalism, methodological neutralism, and methodological contextualism are compatible with universalism. For example, the claim that some general moral precepts are transculturally true implies neither that there is just one path of cultural development, nor even that there is just one *moral* path of cultural development. The term "universalism," as we are using it, carries no suggestion that there is just one way to skin a cat.

It is by attending to the different relations, circumstances, and qualifications of beings, and the natures and tendencies of objects, and by examining into the whole truth of every case, that we judge what *is* or *is not to be* done. And as there is an endless variety of cases, and the situations of agents and objects are ever changing; the universal law of rectitude [...] must be continually varying in its *particular* demands and obligations.

Cases change with the person, and with circumstances. [...] A person may kill in his own defense, but not in different circumstances. [...] Cases are varied indefinitely; and rules of action being general, cannot provide for all the peculiarities of any case whatever. [...] The only direction on which men can rely in every particular case, is the discernment of a wise and benevolent mind.

The general tendency of an act is more or less pernicious, according to the sum total of its consequences [...] The *circumstances* with which they [the acts] may have been accompanied [...] must necessarily be taken into the account before anything can be determined relative to the consequences. [...] In some circumstances even to kill a man may be a beneficial act: in others, to set food before him may be a pernicious one.

Now the proponents of descriptive relativism:

When men unacquainted with other modes of life than their own meet with the record of such actions [...], they look upon them as sins, and do not consider that their own customs either in regard to marriage, or feasts, or dress, or the other necessities and adornments of human life, appear sinful to the people of other nations and other times. [...] Every nation has a different custom [...]

I believe that no fancy [...] can enter into the human imagination, of which we do not find an example. [...] In some countries there are public brothels of males, and even marriages between them. There are countries where women go to the wars together with their husbands [...] Where [...] female children are killed at birth [...] Where they boil the body of a deceased person [...] which is then mixed with their wine and drunk [...] Where they kill lice with their teeth, [...] and think it horrible to see them crushed under their nails. [...] Where a man may, without scandal, get his mother with child, and fathers consort with their daughters and sons [...] Here they live on human flesh; there it is a pious duty to kill your father at a certain age. [...] To sum up [...] there is nothing that custom does not or cannot do [...].

We see neither justice nor injustice which does not change its nature with change in climate. Three degrees of latitude reverse all jurisprudence; a meridian decides the truth. [...] Theft, incest, infanticide, parricide, have all had a place among virtuous actions.

Whether there be any such moral principles wherein all men do agree, I appeal to any who have [...] looked abroad beyond the smoke of their own chimneys. [...] Have there not been whole nations [...] amongst whom the exposing of their children, and leaving them [...] to perish by want or wild beasts, has been the practice [...]? Do they not still, in some countries, put them into the same graves with their mothers, if they die in childbirth [...]? And are there not places where, at a certain age, they kill or expose their parents [...]? If we look abroad to take a view of men as they are, we shall find that they have remorse in one place for doing or omitting that which others, in another place, think they merit by.

Men are not universally agreed concerning the actions which they require or prohibit in any case whatever. What is reckoned innocent or praiseworthy in one country, is reckoned a heinous offence in another.

There is scarcely a single vice, which in some age or country of the world, has not been countenanced by public opinion [...] Suicide in one age of the world is heroism; in another felony [...] Theft, which is punished by most laws, by the laws of Sparta was sometimes rewarded [...] Crimes, of which it is no longer permitted us even to speak, have had their advocates amongst the sages of very renowned times [...] The forgiveness of injuries and insults is accounted by one sort of people magnanimity, by another meanness [...].

Do these statements come from twentieth-century relativists? No, the first set comes from Cicero, Aquinas, Richard Price, Adam Ferguson, and Jeremy Bentham; the second from Augustine, Montaigne, Pascal, Locke, Ferguson, and Paley.¹¹ The oldest dates from 44 B.C., the most recent from 1789. They show that situational and descriptive relativism were not the least bit novel in the days of Sumner and Benedict.

While on the subject of novelty, it's worth noting that cultural relativism, in forms akin to agent relativism, appraiser relativism, and total relativism, was anything but new at the dawn of modern social science. It had been defended in antiquity, notably by the Sophists, and had been popular off and on in the centuries that followed. Thus we find Augustine pausing to address it in *De Doctrina Christiana* (bk. 3, chap. 14), and Lord Chesterfield cautioning his son not to accept it, in a letter dated 1750. (Chesterfield 1774, letter of Jan. 8, 1750.)

One more aside before proceeding: If we take descriptive relativism to mean that different cultures accept *radically* different moralities,¹² it is open to potent objections.¹³ There is evidence that at the level of general principles, the moral views of the world's cultures overlap considerably. (See Davis [1975] and Harbour [1995], and the works they cite.) What varies are the conclusions drawn from those principles, and the applications of the principles to practical affairs. (For useful discussions of how moral conclusions can vary among people who share the same moral premises see Milo 1986; Thomson 1990).

5.

At this point, the relativist is running out of positions. I do not mean that no more are possible, but that the plausible ones are almost sure to lack feature

¹¹ For the first set see Cicero 1909, bk. 1, chap. 10; Aquinas 1945, I, q.19, a.6, ad.1; Price 1948, 164f., Ferguson 1773, 163f.; Bentham 1948, chap. 7, secs. 2, 21. For the second set see Augustine 1952, bk. 3, chap. 14; Montaigne 1927, 1: 106ff.; Pascal 1941, sec. 5, no. 294; Locke 1909, bk. 1, chap. 3, secs. 2, 9; Ferguson 1773, 161; Paley 1785, bk. 1, chap. 5.

¹² Appearances notwithstanding, this is not the way it is taken by most of the (relevant) authors in note 11. For instance, Ferguson (1773, 162ff.) explicitly criticizes the view that moral variation exists at the most basic level.

¹³ The objections, by the way, are no more novel than descriptive relativism. See, for example, Ferguson *op. cit.*; Price 1948, 166–76, especially 170f.; Ensor 1801, 319ff.; and Dymond 1844, Essay I, pt. 1, chap. 6.

(F). For instance, some relativists will say that they never meant anything as extreme as agent relativism, appraiser relativism, or total relativism; they simply meant one of the following:

- *The principle of tolerance*: Disrespect for other ways of life is neither morally nor rationally justified. We need more tolerance and understanding in the world.
- *Moral humanism*: Morality does not consist of “transcendental truths,” divorced from human needs and interests. Morality is a human device, and serves the needs and interests of actual people. Although its broadest requirements are universal, there are many ways to meet them, and many different circumstances to accommodate. Thus, we should expect the narrower demands of morality, meaning its rules and maxims, to vary from culture to culture.
- *Nonabsolutism*: No moral rule is “absolute” in the sense of being indefeasible. We can always find situations, however rare, in which it is trumped by other moral rules. The frequency of these situations is bound to vary with time and place.
- *Nonrationalism*: No moral truth is “absolute” in the sense of being rationally binding on all agents. That is, for any true moral precept we can find people whose aims and desires are such that their failure to comply with the precept is not a mark of irrationality. Even the psychopath, who finds every moral truth motivationally inert, is not necessarily irrational. He is atypical, and no doubt psychologically flawed. But not every psychological flaw is a brand of irrationality.
- *Praise/blame contextualism*: Whether a person warrants praise or blame for a deed depends on a number of things that vary with time and place. These include the alternatives available to the person, and the demands of his community. Thus, what merits praise or blame in one society is unlikely to do so in all societies.

These views are plausible and important, but they will not do as formulations of relativism. Each dovetails with one or more of the theories relativism aims to rule out, and thus fails to meet condition (F). For instance, the first view often receives utilitarian backing, and the third view is part of the formalism of W. D. Ross (1930), an arch-universalist. And virtually every thesis in the list, especially the second and the fourth, is advanced by W.T. Stace (1937), one of the best known *critics* of cultural relativism.

A natural objection here is that although the above five views are logically compatible with universalism, they were not accepted, much less defended, by universalists until cultural relativism came on the scene. The five views are not so much tenets of universalists as *concessions* to relativism. Were it not for the research of early twentieth century relativists, not one of the listed views would be commonplace.

This objection resembles the one in Section 4, and is equally mistaken. Not one of the five views it concerns was a fresh idea when Sumner's *Folkways* went to press. Indeed, one finds little explicit support for the above five views (with the possible exception of the first one) in the works of Sumner, Benedict, and Herskovits. A better source—just one of many—is Friedrich Paulsen's influential textbook, *A System of Ethics*, first published in 1889.¹⁴ There we find all five views defended, and no evidence that Paulsen thought them original or startling. Paulsen is classified by some as an ideal utilitarian (Rashdall 1924, 1: 217); by others as a self-realization theorist (Pratt 1949, 86). In either case, he holds a theory opposed to relativism, a theory relativism was meant to overthrow. But he has no trouble accommodating the five theses listed above, for not one of those theses rules out the existence of universal moral truths. The claim that "Genocide is not good" is universally true is not called into doubt by arguing that the world needs more tolerance, that morality lacks a transcendent source, and so forth. For instance, it is not called into doubt by arguing (whether plausibly or not) that some of those who have committed genocide are blameless. Whether a person is blameless for a deed is one thing; whether his deed was a *good thing* is another.

6.

In sum, cultural relativism is problematic in a way that seldom receives attention. The problem is that relativism resists formulations that meet the reasonable conditions listed at the start of this paper. This puts cultural relativists in a tight spot. I have not shown that they cannot escape it, for I have not discussed every imaginable formulation of their thesis. But I have discussed the most common formulations, including those that appear in the classic sources for relativism. My discussion supports this conclusion: Assuming that Sumner and his ilk have defended something tolerably clear, precise, and intelligible, they have done one of two things: They have advanced a view which is not even superficially threatening to universalism; or they have advanced a theory which, though perhaps superficially menacing to universalism, is either of the wrong content or of insufficient plausibility

¹⁴ See Paulsen 1899, especially 1–25, 222–50, 340–77, 635ff., 658ff., 672–81. I do not claim that even if Benedict and others of her ilk had been publishing in Paulsen's day, he would have had nothing to learn from them. His thought contains traces of *developmentalism*, the defeat of which owes much to Benedict, and other members of the "Boasian" school of anthropology. But this is not to retract my claim that Paulsen holds all five of the above listed theses; nor is it to say that he could have learned something from cultural relativists *qua* cultural relativists. As pointed out earlier, nondevelopmentalism differs markedly from cultural relativism. Nondevelopmentalism is not a *moral* theory of any kind.

to give universalists any real trouble. In either case, they have produced nothing that threatens universalism.

Department of Philosophy
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)
425 University Blvd.
Indianapolis, IN 46202-5140
USA

References

- Aquinas. [1273] 1945. *Summa Theologica*. In *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*. Ed. A. C. Pegis. New York: Random House.
- Augustine. [397 A.D.] 1952. *On Christian Doctrine*. Trans. J. F. Shaw. In *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 18. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica.
- Ayres, Clarence E. 1929. *Holier Than Thou*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Babbie, Earle. 1988. *The Sociological Spirit*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Bayefsky, Anne F. 1996. Cultural Sovereignty, Relativism, and International Human Rights: New Excuses for Old Strategies. *Ratio Juris* 9: 42–59.
- Benedict, Ruth. 1934a. Anthropology and the Abnormal. *Journal of General Psychology* 10: 59–82.
- . 1934b. *Patterns of Culture*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Bentham, Jeremy. 1948. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Ed. W. Harrison. Oxford: Blackwell. (1st ed. 1789.)
- Bodley, John H. 1997. *Cultural Anthropology: Tribes, States, and the Global System*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield. (2nd ed.)
- Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope, 4th Earl of. 1774. *Letters to his Son*. Many editions.
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius. [44 B.C.] 1909. *Offices*. Trans. T. Cockman. London: J. M. Dent & Sons.
- Davis, W. H. 1975. Cultural Relativity in Ethics. *Southern Humanities Review* 9: 51–62.
- Downs, James F. 1975. *Cultures in Crisis*. Beverly Hills, CA: Glencoe. (2nd ed.)
- Dymond, Jonathan. 1844. *Essays on the Principles of Morality*. New York: Collins. (1st ed. 1829.)
- Ensor, George. 1801. *The Principles of Morality*. London: J. S. Jordan.
- Ferguson, Adam. 1773. *Institutes of Moral Philosophy*. Edinburgh: Kincaid, Creech, and Bell. (2nd ed.)
- Frankena, William K. 1973. *Ethics*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. (2nd ed.)
- Hanson, F. Allan. 1995. Racism and Relativism. *Tikkun* 10: 63–66.
- Harbour, Frances V. 1995. Basic Moral Values: A Shared Core. *Ethics and International Affairs* 9: 155–70.
- Harman, Gilbert. 1975. Moral Relativism Defended. *Philosophical Review* 84: 3–22.
- Harris, Marvin. 1991. *Cultural Anthropology*. New York: HarperCollins. (3rd ed.)
- Harrison, Jonathan. 1971. *Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Hatch, Elvin. 1983. *Culture and Morality: The Relativity of Values in Anthropology*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Herskovits, Melville J. 1945. The Processes of Cultural Change. In *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*. Ed. Ralph Linton, 143–70. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1948. *Man and His Works*. New York: Knopf.

- . 1955. *Cultural Anthropology*. New York: Knopf.
- . 1973. *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism*. New York: Vintage.
- Howard, Rhoda E. 1993. Cultural Absolutism and the Nostalgia for Community. *Human Rights Quarterly* 15: 315–38.
- James, William. 1890. *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Locke, John. 1909. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. London: Routledge. (1st ed. 1690.)
- Lyons, David. 1976. Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence. *Ethics* 86: 107–21.
- Maybury-Lewis, David H. P. 1993. A Special Sort of Pleading: Anthropology at the Service of Ethnic Groups. In *Talking About People: Readings in Contemporary Cultural Anthropology*. Ed. W. A. Haviland and R. J. Gordon, 16–24. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Milo, Ronald D. 1986. Moral Deadlock. *Philosophy* 61: 453–71.
- Montaigne, Michel de. 1927. Of Custom. In *The Essays of Montaigne*. Posthumous ed. Trans. E. J. Trechmann, 1: 103–20. New York: Oxford University Press. (1st ed. 1580.)
- Nanda, Serena. 1994. *Cultural Anthropology*. 5th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1992. Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism. *Political Theory* 20: 202–46.
- Paley, William. 1785. *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*. London: R. Faulder.
- Pascal, Blaise. 1941. *Pensées*. Trans. W. F. Trotter. New York: Modern Library. (1st ed. 1670.)
- Paulsen, Friedrich. 1899. *A System of Ethics*. Trans. Frank Thilly. New York: Scribners. (1st ed. in German 1889.)
- Pratt, James Bissett. 1949. *Reason in the Art of Living*. New York: Macmillan.
- Price, Richard. 1948. *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*. 3d ed. Ed. D. D. Raphael. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (1st ed. 1758.)
- Rashdall, Hastings. 1924. *The Theory of Good and Evil*. London: Oxford University Press. (2nd ed.)
- Renteln, Alison Dundes. 1990. *International Human Rights: Universalism Versus Relativism*. London: Sage.
- Ross, W. D. 1930. *The Right and the Good*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Schmidt, Paul H. 1955. Some Criticisms of Cultural Relativism. *Journal of Philosophy* 52: 780–91.
- Shaw, William H. 1981. Relativism and Objectivity in Ethics. In *Morality and Moral Controversies*. Ed. John Arthur, 31–50. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Shweder, Richard A. 1990. Ethical Relativism: Is There a Defensible Version? *Ethos* 18: 205–18.
- Stace, W. T. 1937. *The Concept of Morals*. New York: Macmillan.
- Sumner, William Graham. 1906. *Folkways*. Boston: Ginn.
- Thomson, Judith Jarvis. 1990. The No Reason Thesis. In *Foundations of Moral and Political Philosophy*. Ed. E. F. Paul, F. D. Miller Jr., and J. Paul, 1–21. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Tilley, John J. 1988. Inner Judgements and Moral Relativism. *Philosophia* 18: 171–90.
- . 1998a. Cultural Relativism. As yet unpublished.
- . 1998b. Moral Subjectivism. *Quarterly Journal of Ideology* (forthcoming).
- Wheeler, Allen. 1958. *The Quest for Identity*. New York: Norton.
- Zechenter, Elizabeth M. 1997. In the Name of Culture: Cultural Relativism and the Abuse of the Individual. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 53: 319–47.