

RELATIVISM

(Cultural Relativism)

“WHEN IN ROME”

MAIN IDEAS: There are no universal truths in ethics, just cultural customs and opinions. There is no independent standard of right and wrong, everything is culturally dependent. The morals of a culture cannot be wrong, just different.

QUESTIONS?

A CULTURAL RELATIVIST MAY ASK:

Who am I to judge?

“When in Rome” how can I “do as the Romans do”?

How can I be as open as possible to other cultures and ways of doing things?

SAYINGS

ASSOCIATED WITH THIS PERSPECTIVE:

“It’s all relative”

“To each their own”

“Live and let live”

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do”

PROS +

PREFERENCE. We shouldn't assume that all our cultural practices are based on some universally accepted standard and that they are better than other cultural practices. Some things are just cultural preferences that are no better or worse than the preferences in another culture.

What is the proper way to dress? How we dress and how much skin we show is often based on cultural practice and may not have a "right answer." What is the proper way to have a funeral? Is there really a "right way" or just cultural practice?

OPEN-MINDEDNESS. What we learn in our culture(s) may not be the "one truth." Our thoughts and feelings can be the result of cultural conditioning. Considering other opinions and questioning what our culture has taught us can be helpful. We can become more open to different ways of viewing the world and get beyond imposing our ideas or preferences.

Your friend grew up in a place where they were taught that it's wrong to be gay. They did not question this idea because it was a very common belief in that culture. Then they met someone from a different culture that was very accepting of gay people and your friend began to question what they were taught about gay people.

CONS -

UNABLE TO CRITIQUE OTHER SOCIETIES. If the only measures of right or wrong are the standards of a culture, we cannot criticize any other cultural practices. Being open minded is often a great thing, but there are some things that seem to be wrong regardless of what a culture says, things that many feel we should not tolerate.

Nazi Germany, Apartheid in S. Africa, Khmer Rouge Regime in Cambodia, etc.

UNABLE TO CRITIQUE OWN SOCIETY. If the only measures of right or wrong are the standards of a culture, we cannot criticize our own culture. However, there are things that our culture has gotten wrong, things many feel we should not tolerate.

Slavery, denying women's rights, environmental destruction, etc.

NO MORAL PROGRESS. If the only measures of right or wrong are the standards of a culture, how can there be any moral progress? To say that we have progressed as a society seems to contradict the main point of cultural relativism, namely that there are no universal standards of right and wrong. If there are no universal standards across cultures, there is no way to have moral progress because we can't compare.

Examples of moral progress: Women now have the right to vote in many places, Indian Independence (e.g., Gandhi), US Civil Rights movement (e.g., MLK Jr.)

CONCLUSION

Cultural Relativism highlights a valuable lesson: that many practices and attitudes are culturally created and are neither right nor wrong. However, this does not mean that there is nothing that is right or wrong. Most of us would agree that slavery is wrong regardless of where it occurs, therefore we must look to other perspectives (e.g., Pluralism) when deciding what is right.