

## What is cultural relativism?

is the view that all beliefs, customs, and ethics are relative to the individual within his own social context.

In other words, "right" and "wrong" are culture-specific

*"Different cultures have different moral codes" often is used as a key to understanding morality. Proponents argue that there is not as universal truth in ethics; there are only the various cultural codes and nothing more. The customs of different societies is all that exist*



# Human Rights & Cultural Relativism

**Female Genital Mutilation poses a significant health risk to women. It can lead to infection, death, permanent psychological damage, among other complications. Women subject to this practice are being oppressed by men seeking to reinforce their dominance over females**



# Cultural Relativism

- “Different cultures have different moral codes” often is used as a key to understanding morality. Proponents argue that there is not as universal truth in ethics; there are only the various cultural codes and nothing more. The customs of different societies is all that exist.
- Proponents would argue that customs can not be judged as correct or incorrect.
- Our own code of ethics has no special status; it is merely one among many

Tightening the Definition— The focus here is on whether or not one culture can judge another; the focus is not on whether or not one individual can judge another.

# **Cultural Relativism**

Challenges our ordinary belief in the objectivity and universality of moral truths--

- It says in effect that there is no such thing as a universal truth or ethical standard that can be applied.
- Refutes ethnocentrism-- Your own code of ethics offers nothing special and is no better than that of another culture.

Sounds appealing...

# The Consequences of Accepting Cultural Relativism

- 1) We could no longer say that customs of other societies are morally inferior to others. (This is one of the main points of Cultural Relativism.)
  - + We would have to stop condemning other societies merely because they are different.
  - Tolerance towards slavery, anti-Semitism, hatred towards ethnic groups, or minorities, child porn, sex slave trade
    - . If we took the cultural relativism seriously, we would have to regard these behaviors as immune from criticism as long as they are considered morally acceptable within the practicing culture.

# **Problems with Cultural Relativism**

1. No blame of other cultures for “wrong” or “evil” deeds. Are cultures morally infallible?
2. No criticism of our own culture
3. No idea of moral progress
4. In a relativist society the view of the majority rules. Is this fair?
5. Is tolerance a universal value, in which case relativism is paradoxical?
7. Don’t we all instinctively believe that some things are universally right and wrong?

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## If we accept Cultural Relativism

- 2) We could decide whether actions are right or wrong just by consulting the standards of our society.

In Colonial America slavery was OK, women were not allowed to vote or own property, primogeniture was practiced, etc.; therefore, these things were right.

*(+) deciding what is right or wrong in a situation is easier*

## If we accept Cultural Relativism

3) The idea of moral progress is called into doubt.

Progress implies doing things better, but cultural relativism rejects making judgments about past eras.

*Reform movements such as rights for women and minorities that implies modern society is better is a judgment that is impossible to make.*

# The Result?

Many reject the cultural relativism arguments--

1. It makes sense to condemn some practices wherever they occur.
2. It makes sense to acknowledge that our society while imperfect has made moral progress.
3. Because Cultural Relativism implies these judgments make no sense, the argument goes, it cannot be right.

# Claims of Cultural Relativists

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society.
3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one societies code as better than another.
4. The moral code of our society offers nothing special.
5. There is no universal truth in ethics...
6. It is arrogant to judge the conduct of other societies; we should adopt an attitude of tolerance.