Limits of enlightenment rationality in the face of cultural relativism

Biological universals, symbolic particulars and political discourse

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Outline

- Origins and nature of cultural relativism
- Paradoxes of cultural relativism
- Challenges to cultural relativism: conservative, liberal, rationalistic/scientific
- Cultural relativism as a cultural pattern
- Enlightment, romaticism, secular humanism and limits of cultural relativism as a political view

Defining cultural relativism (the Google way)

- the ability to view the beliefs and customs of other peoples within the context of their culture rather than one's own. www.china.org.cn/english/features/Archaeology/98851.htm
- understanding the ways of other cultures and not judging these practices according to one's own cultural ways. oregonstate.edu/instruct/anth370/gloss.html
- Cultural values are arbitrary, and therefore the values of one culture should not be used as standards to evaluate the behavior or persons from outside that culture. www.killgrove.org/ANT220/cultanthdef.html
- the position that the values, beliefs and customs of cultures differ and deserve recognition. www.anthro.wayne.edu/ant2100/GlossaryCultAnt.htm
- Cultural relativism is the principle that an individual human's beliefs and activities make sense in terms of his or her own culture. This principle was established as axiomatic in anthropological research in by Franz Boas in the first few decades of the 20th century, and then popularized in the 1940s by Boas's students. ... en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_relativism

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Defining cultural relativism

- The degree to which an individual or a society is willing to suspend the universality of values and value-based actions (particularly those acquired by primary socialization) in the face of conflicting values held and acted upon by individuals or groups recognized as belonging to another in-group defined social unit.

Origins and nature of relativism

- Natural relativism (Bible, Jesuits, missionaries, ‘different folks different strokes’/‘when in Rome’ [387 A.D.])
- Enlightenment (pursuit of happiness)
- Romanticism (noble savage)
- Anthropology (Boas, Lévy-Strauss)
- Linguistics (Whorf-Sapir, Lakoff)
- Philosophy (pragmatism)

Paradoxes of cultural relativism

- Cultural relativism vs. universals (anthropological, linguistics, biological) [theoretical - the easy one] - deep down we're all the same (Fukuyama); we're all irrevocably different (Huntington)
- Cultural relativism vs. ethnocentrism [practical - the tough one]
  - it appears to be a natural state of all societies to be ethnocentric

Conservative challenges to relativism

Cultural relativism = moral relativism

- “Relativism has become a kind of virus, attacking the immune systems of institutional legitimacy and public decency.” Dinesh D’Souza, 1995
- “I hate relativism. I hate relativism more than I hate anything else, excepting, maybe, fiberglass powerboats. More to the point, I think that relativism is very probably false.” Jerry Fodor, 1985

Liberal challenges to relativism

Cultural relativism ≠ moral relativism

(unless an individual's human rights are threatened)

- Feminism (genital mutilation, rape, veil)
- Secular humanism (individual potential)

Conservative challenge parodied

"A spectre haunts human thought: relativism. If truth has many faces, the not one of them deserves trust or respect. Happily, there is a remedy: human universals. They are the holy water with which the spectre can be exorcised. But, of course, before we can use human universals to dispel the threat of cognitive anarchy, which would otherwise engulf us, we must first *find* them. And so, the new hunt for the Holy Grail is on." (Ernest Gellner, 1981)

Scientific/rationalistic challenges

- Psychology
  - psychoanalysis (Samoa adolescence; Bereavement & maternal instincts; cf. Tsunami counseling – universal nature of psychological trauma)
  - Cognitive psychology (color research, Hopi time)
- Science
  - Ethology (Konrad Lorenz on Evil)
  - Genetics - Evolutionary Psychology

Relativism and universals (one paradox explained)

- **Biological:** Smile, Incest, Love
- **Anthropological:** Power, Gender roles, Marriage ("having a publicly recognized right of sexual access to a woman deemed eligible for childbearing" Universal People, Brown, 1991)
- **Linguistic:** Time/tense/aspect/modality, Categorization, Iconicity

- Symbolic patterns vs. biology

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Relativism and ethnocentrism as a political stance [the real problem]

- Immigrants bring economic benefits (and diversity, see below)

vs.

- Immigrants bring incoherent culture (relativize values)

the Indian Labour voter /Black Democrat paradox

Problems with rationalist conceptualizations of diversity and homogeneity

- Conceptual frames [patterns of expectation] of diversity and homogeneity (Parmenides vs. Heracleitos)
  - Scenarios of diversity: Evolutionary of diversity paradox (Jared Diamond, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, ('world would be boring, if everyone was the same')
  - Scenarios of homogeneity (being "deep down…", "find someone with like interests", "he's being very American" – how many people are like that? - Asymmetric perception)

Relativism and conceptual analysis

- The theory
  - Discourse on relativism revolves around conceptual patterns of expectation (frames) built on images, scenarios, folk theories, salient examples, decision making algorithms and negotiation [not memes]
  - These frames categorize the world in complex ways as described by the prototype theory of categorization (the ‘law of excluded middle’ is only one of the frame building folk theories)
  - Social science doesn’t have a good way of dealing with phenomena across levels of magnification (similarly to sciences) [e.g. Diamond on Rwanda genocide]
- Conclusion
  - Enlightenment rationality built around classical logic and the premise of individual human rights [pursuit of happiness] cannot be a good descriptive framework (partly because it breaks down with paradoxes)
  - An adequate descriptive/explanatory framework cannot be the political solution because it has to be relativistic to the point of action paralysis [e.g. Pedophilia in Hair, the musical]

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