

A CASE FOR CULTURAL RELATIVISM IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD

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Abstract

It has been argued that cultural relativism has only created greater problems for humanity in the sense that it has helped polarize the world along the line of difference. Put differently, many have argued that, cultural relativism in its many strands, if allowed to stand will plunge the world into a theatre of intolerance and ultimately, conflict. This paper attempted to debunk such assertions and argued that relativism especially from its cultural dimension is what confers identity on a group. It also made the point that we have to acknowledge difference before we can tell where there are overlaps among human cultures. The paper adopted arguments from relativists like Rorty, Kuhn, Quine and Anyanwu to place relativism on an enviable pedestal. The analytical, critical and reconstructive methods of philosophy were employed in this work. The analytical method helped in clarifying concepts like relativism, culture, subjective, ethical and identity. The critical method was employed to examine the positive aspects of cultural relativism while the method of reconstruction was necessary in linking the views of the advocates already mentioned. The paper recommended that even if there would eventually be a communion of world cultures, it is quite vital to first give primacy to that which defines a person – his cultural heritage. This summarily underscores the primal support for cultural relativism.

Keywords: Relativism, Culture, Constructivism, Universalism, Reality

Concept of Relativism

Most theorists hold the view that the idea of relativism is traceable to the works of a 5th century philosopher Democritus. Further research reveals that Protagoras was the first to hold views that may be described as relativistic when he professed that:

Man is the measure of all things, of the things that they are that they are, and the things that they are not that they are not. Russel, (1995:94).

This implies that every man is the setter of his standard. What he considers as truth, good, evil, real and meaningful are all dependent on him. To put this differently, it means there is nothing that can be classified as objective – there is no objective truth by which one can be adjudged as being right or wrong, good or bad etc.

Before we go any further, it is pertinent to first consider an analysis of the term 'relativism.' For pundits like Brian Longhurst, relativism is a doctrine of social knowledge that has as its tenet the claim that all thought is socially determined. (Longhurst, 1989:75) this is to say that what a group socially accept as viable or valuable to its interest is what it

projects. For Edward Craig, relativism is an idea that states that truth, reality and what is right or wrong depends on our point of view (1998:189). The bottom line here is that there is no objective truth or reality as presented by the foundationalists and realists. Relativism is seen in different forms. It could be gleaned from different perspectives – subjective, ethical, and epistemological. It can also be rationalistic, perceptual and conceptual. Let us at this juncture shed some light on a few of the strands.

Subjective Relativism:

This is in pursuance with the dictum of Protagoras that “man is the measure of all things.” The major thrust is that whatever appears to me as the truth is the truth to me irrespective of how you perceive it and whatever appears as the truth to you is the truth irrespective of my take on it. Be that as it may, some may argue that this position can easily lead to chaos and anarchy.

Ethical Realivism:

This doctrine denies the existence of one correct moral code that applies to and binds all societies (Barcalow 1994:38). Put differently, there are diverse moral beliefs and standpoints across society such that what may be seen as right or wrong differ from society to society. Invariably, the grounds of moral beliefs are held to be relative to particular position whether such position is individualistic or communal. This position has been attacked on the grounds that it can easily lead society to the abyss. There may be break down in morality as all beliefs and practices are equally legitimated, there being no means of evaluating good or bad practices.

Epistemological Relativism:

Epistemological relativism or what Robert Kirk (1999:36) calls “True – for – us” relativism states that 'true' always really means “true – by – the – standards – of – X where X could be a group or a whole society”. An example might be a theory which understands truth in terms of what is satisfactory to believe. Such a theory allows that truth may differ from group to group or society to society. Here there is a break away from the idea of a culturally independent truth. Since in traditional epistemology belief and truth are considered essential ingredients of knowledge, and since in relativism what is considered as true and worth believing depends on agreement, it becomes the case that knowledge depends solely on a group's or society's point of view or consensus. We can glean a difference between epistemological relativism and subjectivism. The difference lies in the fact that while it is the case that they both emphasize the relativity of truth, one applies strictly to singular entities while the other transcends the singularity to situate at the collective.

Ethno Methodology or Relativism:

Ethno methodology is constructed on the model of such labels as 'ethno botany' and 'ethno medicine', which are terms for the body of native lore in the realms of botany and

medicine. Ethnomethodology is a discipline that examines the general cognitive methods through which 'natives' understand their world. Thus in this variant of relativism, reality is generated by the process through which social agents “think about, describe and account for it, and the consensus they reach about it” (Collin, 1997:27). This variant of relativism makes the assumption that social agents of different nativity would view the world differently.

Cultural Relativism

This is the main strand of relativism this work is anchored on. We had to bring in other variants to help make the concept explicit. More so, we may not be wrong if we posit that all the forms of relativism so far considered are ensconced in the big umbrella 'cultural relativism'. We shall now attempt to explain this concept as well as other notions that may be associated with it, its features before we make a case for it. But first, what is the meaning of the word culture?

To respond to the posed question it is pertinent to go to the etymology of the word itself. The word 'culture' is derived from the Latin word 'colere' which means to till or cultivate. It refers to production by means of labour and the application of skills over an extended period of time of something that does not exist in unmodified nature. There is both the technical and non technical sense of culture. Our preoccupation in this paper is the technical sense. A technical sense of the term culture is exemplified in E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture*. According to him, culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Again, Kroeber and Kluckhohn say that culture 'designates those aspects of the total human environment, tangible and intangible, which have been created by man'(Dunn, 1972:284).

We can deduce from the above that culture consists of certain patterns of behavior which are recurrent and which exist within a social framework and which may serve as a vehicle of identification for those who exhibit such pattern of behavior. The conception of culture Kroeber and Kluckhohn express is a little removed from the material elements as they seem to be more in tone with the immaterial aspect of culture hence the choice of the word 'intangible.' In the same vein, Mary Lee Ledbetter defines culture as “the way of life of a human society which includes language. A culture produces similar thought among a people. To learn about culture one may ask: what language do a people speak?”Ledbetter (2002:1188)

The reason why language must not be left out according to Ledbetter is because language appears to be the canopy under which any culture strives. One cannot talk knowledge, beliefs, cognitive process and so on without talking about language. Furthermore, O'Hear sees cultural relativism as a deterministic doctrine which makes culture too definitive of the group to which it belongs, in that any reception of outside influence is going to seem either impossible in appealing to values not recognized by insiders or undesirable in diluting the purity of distinctiveness of a culture (1998:784). This is to say that the ways

of men cut across diverse societies leaving no culture insular. This may be what Gyekye had in mind when he opined that there is what is called 'descriptive cultural relativism' and 'normative cultural relativism.' Normative cultural relativism implies that there is no such thing as common body of social facts, corresponding to a shared human standard of cognition. Instead, there are several bodies of fact, each relative to the standards relative in a particular society. This may not be unconnected with Gyekye definition of cultural relativism as “that doctrine that denies objectivity or universality of cultural values” (1999:32). To reiterate, cultural relativism holds that values that are held by a people are only true and valid for that cultural group. Hence our abstraction, perception, conception of the real, or the good, our conception of rationality, is as valid as any other, there being no simple or common – neutral standard by which the various goods or values can be evaluated.

The Three Fundaments of Cultural Relativism

- i. Since the value and practices of each culture or society are valid for that culture or society, any attempt by someone outside --that culture to evaluate it would be irrelevant, otiose, inconsequential, and an unjustified interference.*
- ii. Since it is impossible for an outsider to fully appreciate or understand the menaces of the meanings and symbols of a different culture system, there would be no basis for anyone's judging and evaluating another's culture.*
- iii. Since an alien would have no real basis for evaluating another culture, any attempt on their part to do so would always and unavoidably be conditioned by their own background values and beliefs. This would result in a necessary distortion of the judgments that would be made, as these can only reflect the outsider's cultural perspectives.*

Constructivism and Cultural Relativism

The constructivist sees reality as a creation of the way we think and talk. In other words, reality is generated from language (since our thoughts and speeches are impossible outside the use of language). And since language is relative to culture, it becomes the case that reality is culturally determined. The constructivist thesis comes in two ways – social constructivism and scientific constructivism. According to Collin, scientific constructivists are interested in the construction of facts about the physical world while social constructivists are concerned with the generation of social facts (1997:2). It is in constructivism that we see a bifurcation of reality into social and physical, both depending on cultural constructs.

Another appendage of cultural relativism is the thesis of incommensurability. According to Gyekye, this thesis states that there is no common measure or scale for evaluating different cultures (Gyekye, 37). The incommensurability thesis revolves around the idea that cultures cannot be placed in a single normative scale, for they cannot be weighed

from the same scale. There is no common ground for them. To this end, beliefs, canon of rationality, moral values, concepts and theoretical frameworks, perceptions and reality is relative to cultures and there is no meeting point; this is the basic argument of the incommensurability thesis.

From the fore going, we may easily glean certain factors of what qualifies as cultural relativism. The most basic of such factors is that it applies to a group of people rather than to individuals. It is of course possible to argue that an individual living within a community can have her own culture. While this argument may be valid, it is equally a fact that whatever that individual culture is, it has to be subordinate to the collective culture. It has to be in consonance with what is accepted.

Another point worth making is that cultural relativism recognizes and leaves room for heterogeneity of ideas. It does so because it does not approve of a monolithic view of reality. In cultural relativism, reality is culture dependent. It also does not subscribe to the supremacy of one culture to another. It is succinctly put, predicated on the post-modernist assertion that there is no absolute truth.

Defense of Cultural Relativism

The prime argument to examine that supports relativism is the one termed “cosmic porridge” (Kirk, 52). This argument greatly derives from the constructivist thesis that reality is totally dependent on us, and it represents those categories of arguments that rotate around the fringes of absurdity. According to the cosmic porridge argument all that really exist apart from the perceiver is an indeterminate something; this has no features of its own (Kirk, 52). The crux of the argument is that we somehow impose features on the 'undifferentiated stuff'- features which depend on which concepts we happen to have. On the one hand something really exists 'out there', but on the other hand, nothing else can be said about it, which is objectively true. Hence, nothing else exists which is real.

Another extreme interpretation of this argument is that there is no indeterminate stuff out there at all. Rather everything that exists is all in the mind. The import that these have on cultural relativism is seen when we imagine a situation in which we have a community of people who happen to have the same way of imposing features on the 'indeterminate.' That peculiar way of imposing features would be their culture. The implication is that other communities with their own differentiating peculiarities would have different realities. Let us now consider the views of philosophers like Wittgenstein, Quine, Rorty and others. In his works *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein states that philosophy “is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (Wittgenstein, 1967:109). The point he is making here is that philosophical problems especially those bothering on discourses on reality, arise as a result of wrong use of words. He claims then that it is the task of philosophy to ensure that language is properly used. He went further to maintain that our everyday language is governed by rules or norms, which is depicted as the language – game. Invariably, people brought up in different cultures will have different language – games with their own rules. To this end, what belongs to a language

game is a whole culture. Elsewhere he states that “our language game only works, of course, when a certain agreement prevails” (1967:76) where the purported agreement is reached among people who already play the game (people of the same culture).

The above implies that each culture has its language, which conforms to a certain language – game. A language game is the way language is used and meanings generated. It is a language game that determines what is true or false, because truth and falsity depends on statement's conformity to the rules and norms of language. Consequently, truth, falsity, reality and meaning are all dependent on the rules/norms of a language-game. Where language differs, reality differs and there is no objective source of what is correct or not.

More still, Quine's view on cultural relativism can be gathered from his opinion on the indeterminacy of radical translation, inscrutability of reference and ontological relativity. In “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, he proclaimed that there is no demarcation between natural sciences and speculative metaphysics. He, in his empiricism without dogma, seems to have removed any foundation for what is true and meaningful and maintains that our knowledge of reality is man-made (Quine 1963:129).

To Quine, reality transcends empirical verifiability or immediate experience. As a matter of fact reality is like a field of force which is composed of different myths or posits which themselves are cultural; at the centre of the field are myths about gods and theoretical entities, while at the periphery are physical objects. He says that the myth of physical objects have only been more efficacious in explicating reality than other myths not because they are of different kinds to other myths – their differences are only a matter of degree. He writes Physical objects are conceptually imported into the situation as convenient intermediaries – not by definition of terms of experience, but simply as irreducible posits... (Quine, 131)

Invariably, what Quine seems to be alluding to is that there is no one way of seeing the world. Reality is an embodiment of myths of varying degrees of potency which are all culture dependent. This implies that where culture differs, the myth of its reality will also be different thus giving credence to relativity – hence his work *Ontological Relativity*. In this work, Quine subscribes to the indeterminacy of translation because it is very possible to have two different translations in English of a remote language, which may both elicit the same observable behavior and disposition to behave on the parts of the speakers of both languages. In conditions as this, it is impossible to ascertain the right translation. For instance, as Quine exemplifies, if a native sees a rabbit and overtly behaves in such a way as to utter '*gavagai*', the English linguist may be justified for the sake of communication to translate the utterance to “rabbit.” However, it would be missing the point philosophically to just accept that the indeterminacy of radical translation arises from the fact that “we are wondering whether to translate a native expression '*gavagai*' as 'rabbit' or as “undetached rabbit part” or as “rabbit stage”, we can never settle the matter...”(Quine 1969:28).

We might likely argue that the matter can be settled by denotative or ostensive means. Quine interjected at this point by saying that 'rabbit' is a term of divided reference. He writes that:

The indeterminacy of translation now confronts us however, cutting across extension and intension alike. the terms “rabbit,” “undetached rabbit parts”, and “rabbit stage” differ not only in meaning: they are true of different things. Reference itself proves behaviourally inscrutable (Quine, 35).

The implication of the above assertion on language and culture is seen in Quine's idea of homophonic rules and translation. He explains that we all have an individual and peculiar string of phonemes in our idiolect, which gives our characteristic interpretation of our environment (Quine, 46). Thus we as individuals of the same culture have our ways of carrying “each string of phonemes into itself”.

Homophonic rules that inform homophonic translation are acquired, Quine argues, via one's interaction with one's culture. Hence, homophonic translation is a product of homophonic rules, which in turn depends on culture. By implication, where culture differs, homophonic rules and translation differ. This view shows then that people from different environment cannot interpret reality in the same way. Furthermore, the result of interpretation provided that one is observing the same object with an alien, is unclear.

In pursuance with the tenets of cultural relativism, Richard Rorty maintains a pragmatist stance, which in our opinion culminates into relativism. “he aims to undermine the reader's confidence... in 'knowledge' as something ... which... has foundations” (Rorty 1990:7). It is his negative attitude towards foundationalism that qualifies him as a post-modernist. His take on relativism finds expression in his work titled *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. In this work, he borrowed from John Dewey when he opined that justification is a social phenomenon rather than a transaction between the knower and reality; and James view that “truth is what is better for us to believe” (Rorty, 9-10), rather than as the accurate representation of reality.

...the notion of 'accurate representation' is simply an automatic and empty compliment which we pay to those beliefs which are successful in helping us do what we want to do (Rorty, 10).

Consequently, for Rorty, the attempt to explicate 'rationality' and 'objectivity' in terms of conditions of accurate representation is a self-deceptive effort to eternalize the normal discourse of the day (Rorty, 11).

In what he calls epistemological behaviourism, Rorty explains that the community is the source of epistemic authority. The above statements credited to Rorty can be construed as meaning that in a way, truth and hence, reality is culture determined. To corroborate his

argument, Rorty says: To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say

„... that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that wherever there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages are human creation (Rorty, 10).

Rorty is a bit different from philosophers of the analytic school because he does not hold onto the notion that reality is represented or is the product of a cognitive process. In other words, the usual argument that reality is determined by the way we structure or organize and represent objects, which in turn is determined by language or culture does not go down well with Rorty. His own approach to relativism is pragmatic. What is true or real, rather than being a product of a conceptual scheme, is a product of what a society or culture agrees on, “justification is a ... convention ... of social practice” (Rorty, 1989:5). In other words, knowledge (beliefs, truth, reality), is what is workable or convenient for a culture to adopt.

When 'incommensurability' is mentioned in a philosophical discourse, it invariably leads one to the branch of philosophy of science where Kuhn and Ferayabend hold sway. Their views are quite relevant in this work. Their works to all purposes reflect the tenets of relativism even though Kuhn denies this. He holds that progress in science is often characterized by revolution and paradigm shift, in which an emergent scientific theory claims to better deal with any perceived anomaly. Kuhn enthused that there is always a concerted effort by proponents of an old rival theory to maintain the integrity of that theory. This leads to a relativism of truth-values, which are held by the different competing scientific communities involved. Again, what counts as a paradigm is community dependent this, succinctly put is why Kuhn writes that “scientific knowledge, like language, is intrinsically the common property of a group...” (Kuhn 1970:210).

Ferayabend's contribution to this debate can be gleaned from his opinion on incommensurability as well as his notion that science (as presented by the West is the very paradigm of institutionalized rationality) is not necessarily superior to other fields of inquiry. In his irrationalism, he contrasts science with voodoo, astrology and the likes and argues that other inquiry cannot be ruled by recourse to some general criterion of scientificity and rationality (Chalmers, 1990:141). Thus we can see from the fore going that what informs his idea of methodological anarchism and his assertion that “anything goes”.

Let us at this juncture mention the views of a notable African philosopher on the problematic in person of K. C. Anyanwu. Anyanwu maintains that language, apart from being a vehicle of communication, expresses reality. He argues that our language plays important role in perception and interpretation of reality. In other words, our language contains certain framework, which ensures that our pattern of interpretation, generation of meaning and subsequent communication depends on it. The consequence is that where language differs, interpretations, consideration of what is meaningful, and so on also will

differ. Hence, what is 'the real' is relative to the culture from which the language emanates (Anyanwu 1982:127).

Conclusion

Most arguments point to the fact that if allowed to stand, cultural relativism will plunge the world in to further crisis. Our response to this is that the world is already in a worse crisis occasioned by liberal minded 'universalists'. The crisis this time is not direct conflict as seen in terms of war but rather amoral one. We now witness moral crisis all over the world - bisexualism, gay men, lesbianism, to mention but a few. Some governments are having diplomatic problems with those that may not want to adopt their kind of liberal universalists' ideas which may also lead to diplomatic problems that might culminate in war. In Nigeria for instance, few openly display acts mentioned above in the name of universalism. This is a direct consequence of 'liberal universalists' ideas. 'Critics are of the opinion that cultural relativism alleges to preach tolerance while in the real sense as pointed out by Williams, Doyal and Harris, Bidney and Wiredu is back-handed racism, tribalism and ethnocentrism, which are all basic ingredients for conflict. The question is: should we for fear of being termed tribal and racist imbibe practices alien to us as hinted above? Our answer is no. We conclude on the note that, we would rather be termed tribal, ethnocentric and racist than allow those features that confer identity on a group erode us in the name of cultural universalism. More so, reality is too broad to be viewed from universal lenses. The more cultures are encouraged to engage their reality, the more we come to knowledge about our world. To this end, cultural relativism must be emphasized.

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