

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

I. Introduction

When, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein examines what is game in order to know what is a 'language-game', he guards us against the easy assumption that there is anything common to all the games. He tells us: "Don't say: There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games'"—but *look and see* whether there is anything common at all"¹.

If we try to follow his advice for the word 'culture', we are likely to find ourselves in the same puzzlement. Leaving asides the original meanings of the word 'culture' such as "cultivation of soil", "the raising, improvement, or development of some plant, animal or product", and coming directly to the meanings which anthropology considers, we find still a great variety of meanings. Culture could mean "the works of art themselves", "the degree of training acquired by a person", "the external ways of life", "the refinement of thought, emotions and tastes", etc... Culture is not then a thing like a chemical element, a plant, an animal or a man. To define these is already difficult. But when we try to define culture, we have to recognize the aptness of Wittgenstein's remark, when he adds: "The result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing; sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail"².

If we admit the classical definition of culture given by E. B. Tylor in 1871, we find that culture, though taking a more precise sense, is far from being a simple thing. He defined it as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by

man as a member of society".³ Culture, then, in itself is a network of relations, not only relations which exist between persons and things, but also relations between persons and persons, things and things. Culture is, then, basically 'relative' in as far as it is made of relations. Though no one, I believe, would question this cultural relativity, it is good, I think, to have noticed it, before we launch into the debated question of cultural relativism.

For what is meant really by "Cultural Relativism"? Here, again, we have a variety of meanings. It may mean the plain fact that cultures differ in various places, and even in the same place at different times. The Eastern culture is not the Western culture and each, the Eastern and Western, underwent considerable changes so that we usually distinguish ancient, mediaeval and modern cultures. Thus, though man was perhaps never without culture, cultures are essentially diverse and this second, external, relativity is part of their essence. In this sense, again, cultural relativism will, I think, be readily agreed upon.

Another meaning of cultural relativism, which is the controverted one, is more easily grasped by approaching it from its opposite, which could be called "cultural absolutism". Here, we are no more speaking of cultures themselves but of their evaluation by man. If one believes that there is an ideal of culture such that no society could be said to have culture unless it had something which approaches that ideal, one could be called a cultural absolutist. If, on the contrary, one believes that there is no such ideal and that cultures are just different complexes to be studied in their diversity, without reference to a chosen norm, then, one would be a cultural relativist. The extreme cultural relativist would even say that no culture should be preferred to another, or that none could be despised, because cultures are themselves their own norms.

Cultural absolutists of this sort have not been rare, though the label may not have been in use. When the Greeks were calling "barbarians" all those who could not speak their language,

they were displaying a cultural absolutism, which was found also later in the Roman Empire and to a certain extent, in the European world till the last century. Some form of it survives even today. The Chinese too considered for a long time that they had the monopoly of culture. The technical term which characterizes this attitude, is 'ethnocentrism'. One group of people is then inclined to believe that its culture is the model of all cultures. When, with such a mentality, a group studies the mores of other peoples, it finds them primitive or at least exotic. As the Darwinian idea of evolution took hold of the scientific imagination in the last century, Ethnocentrism took a new form and tended to interpret all past history as a preparation for our own present culture. Bergsonism and Marxism could be said to stand for such Evolutionism, though in different ways.

At the extreme opposite, we have the whole group of the relativists. Herodotus, the Greek historian, in the 5th century B.C. had already noticed the variety of cultures and even of ethical norms. The progress of anthropology in this century and the huge amount of new knowledge on the various cultures of the world were bound to revive Cultural Relativism and to make it bear on the field of Ethics.

The American Anthropologist, Melville J. Herskovits, stated the basic principle of this relativism when he wrote : " Judgements are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation ".⁴

In their extreme forms, cultural absolutism and cultural relativism put us in a dilemma. If we side with the absolutists, we shall be dubbed narrow ethnocentrists or naive progressives; if we side with the relativists, we are left with no means of deciding what is right and what is wrong. For tyranny, cruelty and corruption would only be the expressions of a culture and, as such, as good as democracy, humanitarianism and integrity.

II. The Relativism of Modern Anthropology

On the whole modern anthropology seems to admit much of the relativist position, yet not without attempting to find a way out of its disadvantages. Robert Redfield points out the fact that the standards of morality of different peoples are relative and yet he admits that a distinction can be made between non-civilized and civilized peoples, because the latter have "come to develop a more decent and humane measure of goodness".⁵ One may be inclined to think that this is true. But a thorough relativist would still ask how one knows that there is any measure of goodness and how one judges that this measure is 'decent and humane', if there is no fixed norm to go by.

Ralph Linton in his *Study of Man*⁶ holds a middle of the road position on the question of cultural relativism, emphasizing both points of uniformity and diversity.

Clyde Kluckhohn claims that "there is a generalized framework that underlies the more apparent and striking facts of cultural relativity".⁷

A. L. Kroeber in his *Anthropology*⁸ discusses the idea of Progress. He thinks that there is a way of accepting the idea of progress without falling into ethnocentrism and thus he proposes criteria of lesser cultural status, such as magic and superstitious practices, non-adult attitudes to physiological functions and lag in technology.⁹ Thus the progress of some cultures can be admitted if they have surmounted the defects of the lower status.

Melville Jacobs of the University of Washington does not see his way out of a certain relativism, not only a cultural one but even an ethical one. He writes: "Relativism is an unhappy finale for a citizen of Western civilization who feels guilty and insecure without ethical absolutes to protect him from himself."¹⁰ He adds: "But ethical relativism is not a subject regarding which it is necessary or even advisable to be conclusive because decision for or against it adds nothing to knowledge".¹¹

The authors whom we quoted so far, seem thus to resign themselves to relativism. They see in it the rebuttal of ethnocentrism. They recommend it as a predisposition to sympathetic study of cultures different from ours. But when they try to remedy its shortcomings, their efforts seem timid and not too helpful.

III. The Structuralists' Contribution to the Debate

Our review of the Anthropologists' answer would be substantially incomplete, if it did not mention the recent fashionable current of French Structuralism. Within a few years, this trend passed from the restricted milieu of the specialists into the large group of the intelligentsia of Continental Europe where it tended to supplant Existentialism. Its main sponsor is Claude Lévi-Strauss, (French Anthropologist, born in 1908) author of *Tristes Tropiques* (Sad Tropics)¹² and *Structural Anthropology*.¹³ Most of his field work was done in Brazil, but he also travelled much all over the world. Taking his clue from the method used in structural Linguistics, Lévi-Strauss thought that the other forms of manifestations of culture must also have basic structures corresponding to those found in the formation of language. If one could reach those structures, one would get a better understanding not only of one or the other culture, but of what is present in all cultures.

From his meticulous study of the ways of primitive tribes Lévi-Strauss became convinced that the same human intellect has been fully operative and in the same fundamental pattern, since the beginning of human society. This does not only condemn ethnocentrism, but it also rehabilitates primitive peoples and exposes as prejudice the view that modern ways are necessarily better than the old. Lévi-Strauss does not pay exclusive attention to what is immediately apparent in various societies and cultures. As depth psychology tries to reach beyond what we are immediately aware of, so Structuralism seeks to make us progressively aware of what is at work in the formation of societies and cultures, by

seeking 'models'. Thus it looks for the unshakable basis of human society. The study of primitive peoples, writes Lévi-Strauss, helps us "to know closely a state which no longer exists, which may never have existed, which probably never will exist, and of which we must, none the less, have an exact notion if we are to judge our present situation correctly."¹⁴ Lévi-Strauss is actually here quoting Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but his advantage over the latter lies in his having tried to prove the validity of this intuition during his extensive scientific research. From such studies, Lévi-Strauss envisages a possible result: "While not clinging to elements from any one particular society, we make use of one and all of them in order to distinguish those principles of social life which may be applied to the reform of our own customs".¹⁵

From this we should not conclude that Lévi-Strauss is blind to the diversity of cultures. His views lead us, no doubt, beyond sheer relativism. But when in 1952 he wrote for the UNESCO a memoir on Racism, he stressed the advantage of cultural diversity. We must not deny the progress of humanity, he wrote, but conceive it with more prudence.¹⁶ Humanity, in its progress, does not resemble someone climbing a flight of stairs. It makes one think rather of a gambler who plays with a number of dice and who, each time he throws them, sees them making up so many different totals, which are always more or less equal because in each throw what he gains on one dice is likely to be lost on another. Sometimes, however the result is higher. In the same way, it is rare that history is cumulative, i.e. that all the dice are high. If the players are many and if they pool their better results, the chances of gain also increase. So also, the diversity of cultures is good and increases the chances of progress for humanity.¹⁷ Thus, the relativity of cultures is placed at the service of humanity, for all cultures seem to have worked at one task, "that of building a society in which Man can live".¹⁸

But while Lévi-Strauss is very articulate in his analysis of the structures which determine cultural development, he is less explicit in his description of the values which are supposed to be more or less the same for all¹⁹ and are embodied in the various cultures. His Essay on *Race and History* ends with one single recommendation : let each culture not only be tolerant of the other cultures, but be an invitation to the generosity of the others. For true tolerance is a dynamic attitude which consists in foreseeing, understanding and promoting what wants to be.²⁰

IV. The Philosopher's Task

If this is the farthest that the anthropologists can go, should we not stop here ? If the scientist's verdict is for cultural relativism, should we not accept it as the final word ? But anthropology is not alone in the field. There is Sociology, Psychology and also Philosophy. Sociology may be looking more towards practice and more prone to make recommendations which anthropology hesitates to formulate on the basis of its own investigations, for Sociology pays more attention to the present than anthropology. An interesting study of a psychologist in an article of *Mind*²¹ some years back fought against "Ethical Relativity" on the ground that we should not consider moral acts in the abstract but with their concrete situational meanings, and, if we did this, we would discover that, replaced in their contexts, certain primitive practices which we judge immoral might not actually have been so. If Psychology can correct our estimate of the morality of primitive peoples, it might perhaps also help to do the same for our estimate of their cultural achievements.

But, finally, it is to the realm of Philosophy, that we must turn, if we want to know whether cultural relativism is the final answer or only a convenient standpoint for anthropologists. If the philosophers fail to propose and defend a philosophy of values, then we are surely committed to cultural relativism. A pragmatic

argument against this is that, if we are unable to pass judgment on culture, we are also ultimately unable to judge any private behaviour and would have to accept the worse corruption on the plea that it has become part of a culture. Philosophy has surely something to say against a relativism which would excuse the most serious disorder. The difficulty is that philosophers themselves are not of one mind. There are philosophers who limit the scope of philosophy to a critique of science or to the very elimination of philosophy itself. These will not carry us beyond cultural relativism. There are philosophers who think that value judgments are all based on emotions. As these vary, so the value-judgements will vary and again we are relativists.

I do believe that a philosophy of value can be more than an expression of one's own emotions. Man can use his reason to find justifications for some 'oughts' in a careful analysis of what 'is'. There is something which mediates and this something is the dynamism of our being. I can try to refuse to act. But to try to refuse to act is already to act. And thus the practical order is vitally imposed on us. What is not so clearly imposed is the way of acting. And to choose this we have our reason, besides our emotions. Our reason is there to try to decipher the fitness of some 'oughts' in the midst of possible courses of action.

Reflecting, first, upon how it should conduct itself, reason discovers that it ought to seek truth. Reflecting on our will, reason discovers that we should use it to sustain our actions. As Fichte already saw : action is a must, and refusal to act is the first sin of life. Further reflection on what we and others are, will show the need of self-respect and mutual respect. How this respect is to be shown will have to be found by further reflection on the circumstances of persons, places and times. We seem, then, to reintroduce 'relativity'. I would prefer to say that we introduce a ground of diversity, but not necessarily real relativity. For we see something basic to recommend : viz. that we all should

try to pursue the good either of our intellect in truth, or of our will in respect and love, and of our senses in their becoming satisfaction. It is this basic pursuit of the true and the good which is itself the break away from relativism. Each one may form his own conviction as to what he should do, and thus we may still differ. But in this view, we do not admit that anything is as good as anything else, provided it is recommended by a cultural group. True cultural life is anchored in each one's effort to seek and do what is better and in the mutual help which we offer one another in trying to find it and fulfil it.

A relativist would say that this amount still to relativism. I would say that there is a difference. The relativist gives up searching on principle; he resigns from his human task of seeking the truth, while the non-relativist tries to find out, with others, what is proper or better. While following relativism, a man abdicates his full human task, first in the moral order, and, then, in all the other connected fields which make the whole complex of culture.

Without being afraid of diversity, anti-relativism seeks also to overcome the bias of groups and of individuals. A bias is a flight from intelligence, when desire takes precedence over understanding. There is much of it in our own lives, some of it even unconscious. There is much also in the group mentalities or cultures. Anti-relativism does not rest satisfied with such bias. It tries to eliminate them in the light of reason. It seeks order, an order which may require laws, but that in a spirit of freedom which is not afraid to criticize its own laws, in view of further progress.²²

Conclusion

The position which I have taken may seem inconsistent. I have first shown appreciation of a certain relativism because it overcomes ethnocentrism, and because it creates in anthropology a predisposition of understanding and sympathy for cultures

different from ours. But I said also that I was not satisfied with relativism as a final standpoint. For our task is not simply to understand past or neighbouring cultures, but to build our own. With regard to this task, relativism is a betrayal of intelligence and of man. No doubt, anti-relativism must guard against dogmatism and rigidity. We must not too easily believe that we are superior to others. But anti-relativism, conceived in a spirit of freedom and generosity, will at least make us seek and perhaps achieve some progress.

Jnana Deepa,
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NOTES

1. Oxford, Blackwell, 1953, no. 66, p. 31 e.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 32 e.
3. Quoted by R. Williams : " Culture and Civilizations " in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by P. Edwards, U. S. A., 1967, Vol. 2, p. 274.
4. Quoted by George St. Hilaire : " Cultural Relativism and Primitive Ethics, " *The Modern Schoolman*, Vol. 36, 1959, p. 179.
5. *The Primitive World and Its Transformations*, Ithaca, Cornell Univ. Press, 1957, p. 163.
6. First ed. 1936; British Commonwealth Ed., London, Peter Owens 1964.
7. " Universal Categories of Culture, " *Anthropology Today*, Ed. by Kroeber and others, Chicago Univ. Press, 1953, p. 520.
8. Original Ed. 1923; revised ed. 1948; Indian Ed. : Oxford and Ibh Publishing Company, Calcutta, 1967.
9. *op. cit.*, pp. 296-304.
10. *Pattern in Cultural Anthropology*, Homewood, Illinois, The Dorsey Press, 1964, p. 384.
11. *Ibid.*
12. New York, Athenaeum, 1967.
13. New York, Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1967.
14. *Tristes Tropiques*, p. 391.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Race et Histoire*, Paris, Editions Gonthier, 1961, p. 38.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Tristes Tropiques*, p. 392.
19. *Race et Histoire*, p. 50.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
21. Karl Duncker : " Ethical Relativity ? An Enquiry into the Psychology of Ethics, " *Mind*, Vol. 48, 1939, pp. 39-57.
22. Cf. B. Lonergan : *Insight, A Study of Human Understanding*, London, Longmans, 1957, pp. 207-244.