

# Confessions of a Former Cultural Relativist

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It's true. I confess it. I **was** a cultural relativist once. What's more, I still believe in some of it, even though I've rejected most of it-but let me give it to you from the start. I suppose I first ought to explain what cultural relativity is, for those of you who may not know, and how I became one. Then, I'll explain how I gradually became disillusioned, and end up with where I stand now.

## Ethnocentrism

Did you know that the Eskimos don't call themselves Eskimos? That's an Indian name for them, meaning "eaters of raw flesh," a custom that the Indians found disgusting. The Eskimo name for themselves is "Innuit," which translates as "The People." In fact, that sort of thing is quite common; many tribal names translate as "human beings." And if each tribe thinks of itself as "human beings," you know what that must mean about other tribes-they, obviously, must be something less than human. For an example, here's a story concerning the origin of the human races, told by the Cherokee Indians of the Great Smoky Mountains: "The Creator fashioned man by first making and firing an oven and then, from dough he had prepared, shaping three figures in human form. He placed the figures in the oven and waited for them to get done. But his impatience to see the result of this, his crowning experiment in the work of creation, was so great that he removed the first figure too soon. It was sadly underdone-pale, an unlovely color, and from it descended the white people. His second figure had fared well. The timing was accurate, the form, richly browned, that was to be the ancestor of the Indians, pleased him in every way. He so admired it, indeed, that he neglected to take out of the oven the third form, until he smelled it burning. He threw open the door, only to find this last one charred and black. It was regrettable, but there was nothing to be done; and this was the first Negro." You see? Each group feels that, somehow, it is the best, God's chosen people-and others? -well, that's too bad, but obviously they're inferior.

Actually, this kind of attitude is found universally. Early in this century, the American sociologist William Graham Sumner coined a word for it. He called it "ethnocentrism" -the universal tendency for every human group to believe that its own ways, its own customs and beliefs, are the right ways, the best ways-and everybody else's ways are distinctly inferior.

Throughout human history this ethnocentric attitude has been the typical reaction of most travelers who have ever come in contact with people of foreign lands. And it was also the reaction of the early anthropologists of the 19th century, who believed that other cultures represented more primitive, more backward ways, while our Western culture, in Europe and the United States, represented the most advanced, highest pinnacle of evolutionary cultural development.

## Cultural Relativity

It was against this background that Franz Boas, an American anthropologist of German birth, developed the concept of cultural relativity. He rejected the ethnocentric judgments of the 19th century evolutionists, and insisted that each culture should be intensively studied as a separate entity. He also insisted that each culture needs to be understood in terms of its own unique background and circumstances. Rather than judging another culture, or even any practice of another culture, by our own ethnocentric standards, Boas said that the practices and customs of another culture should be understood only in terms of its own context and its own standards. This, then, was the doctrine of cultural relativity: that all customs are relative to a particular cultural context; that is, they stem from that context, are meaningful only in that context, and should be understood only in terms of that context.

Franz Boas has sometimes been called the father of American anthropology, and he certainly set the predominant tone of the field for the first half of this century. The cultural relativity that he espoused became the dominant philosophical stance of both anthropology and sociology. My own training in those fields included that philosophical position, becoming an outlook that I adopted wholeheartedly, and advocated in my teaching-even defending its merits in a College Forum debate many years ago with Bob Casier, Tim Fetler, and Laura Boutilier.

Probably one of the more vigorous exponents of the doctrine of cultural relativity was Melville Herskovits, a student of Franz Boas. He formulated what has become one of the basic statements of cultural relativity: "Evaluations are relative to the cultural background out of which they arise." Herskovits rejected the notion that our culture, or any culture, has exclusive possession of a set of absolute standards by which all other cultures can be judged. He rejected any such claim as just another example of ethnocentrism.

All such evaluations, Herskovits insisted, are relative-not just evaluations that involve judgments of what is good and bad, but also evaluations as to what is right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, normal and abnormal. Even our perception of the world around us is conditioned and influenced by culture, so that truth and reality themselves become relative, each culture with its own unique view of reality, again with no way to prove that any one view is superior to any other.

Herskovits went on to draw one more important conclusion from these premises. Since there are no absolute values, since all values are relative, since there is no way to demonstrate that any one set of values, or practices, or customs, or morals, or truths is any more valid than any other, it behooves us then to have tolerance and respect for other cultures. Herskovits put it this way: "Cultural relativism is a philosophy which, in recognizing the values set up by every society to guide its own life, lays stress on the dignity inherent in every body of custom, and on the need for tolerance of conventions though they may differ from one's own."

## Relativity in American Society

This philosophy of respect for and tolerance of differences has struck a deeply responsive chord in the intellectual life of our society. In fact, the development of such a philosophy is easily understandable in the context of our democratic, liberal, pluralistic society. Certainly, if we are not to be constantly at each others' throats over our differences as Catholics and Protestants, Gentiles and Jews, Republicans and Democrats, blacks and whites, etc., we need to have a national philosophy of toleration, of "live and let live," of "to each his own," "one man's meat is another man's poison."

So, in many ways, this philosophy of cultural relativity has permeated our thinking and our social lives. This has become a relativistic era. The very term has become a cliché, thanks in no small part to Albert Einstein and his theory of relativity in physics, which few of us understand but virtually everyone has heard of. You can frequently hear people say, "Everything's relative," "it's all relative."

This principle of relativity is extended in everyday life to the individual level as well. Whenever a moral or ethical question comes up in my anthropology classes, or even more so in my sociology class on marriage, whether it's a question about sex or abortion or almost any other question, a very common response by students is "it's all up to the individual," or "it's that person's choice to make." I find students generally very reluctant to **judge** anyone's behavior, to evaluate it in any way. Most of them resist saying that anyone's else's ideas or behavior are **wrong**, or **bad**. One student said recently in class that he doesn't even use the words "good" or "bad"-it's all relative.

To summarize what we've said about the concept of cultural relativity so far, it says that there are no absolute standards for judging customs, that a society's customs and ideas should be viewed and understood in the context of that society's culture. It further says that all cultures and cultural practices are equally valid, of equal worth and equal dignity, and so we should have tolerance and respect for cultural practices and ideas, even if they happen to differ from ours, or even if they're considered "bad" by our society's standards.

## What's Wrong with Cultural Relativity?

Well, what could possibly be wrong with that? How could any right-thinking person find anything wrong with tolerance and respect for other people's ideas, with granting them the dignity and validity that surely all the world's peoples are entitled to?

To question tolerance and respect is like questioning God, motherhood, and apple pie-but I'd like to give it a try, and in so doing, show you how I became disillusioned with cultural relativity.

Let's do it this way: let's peek and eavesdrop, in imagination, on my Cultural Anthropology class at various times during the semester, as the class and I proceed on our journey of exploration of human cultures.

First, the students read in their textbook about cultural relativity; there they learn that all customs of a society should be viewed in terms of that society, rather than in terms of their own. They are told that the relativistic attitude fosters empathy and understanding, and respect for other cultures, and that one should avoid making value judgments about other cultures. They also learn about ethnocentrism, and the problems and misunderstandings that arise from the ethnocentric attitude-an attitude that in fact many students bring with them when they first sign up for the course.

Thus equipped, we're ready for the first visit of our journey, to the Tlingit Indians of the 19th century who lived in southeastern Alaska. We listen to a recorded drama that tells of a Tlingit Indian-a warrior, who's also a husband and father-who willingly lets himself be killed in order to avenge a murder committed, not by him, but by another, more high-ranking member of his clan. It seems a very strange custom from our perspective, but we learn that it's perfectly understandable within the total context of the Tlingit Indian culture.

Next, we see a film about life-and death-among the Dani, a Stone Age people in a remote valley in New Guinea. By this time, the students aren't even fazed by the unusual clothing of the Dani: for the men, feathers in the hair, and a long, slim gourd over the penis (Fig. 1); for the women, net bags draped over their heads and down their backs, leaving their breasts exposed (Fig. 2).



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

But the Dani have other interesting customs and beliefs too. They believe in ghosts, and that the ghosts of people slain in war or ambush must be avenged-because unavenged ghosts bring sickness, unhappiness and disaster. Therefore, at the time the film was made, in 1961, the Dani were still fighting a seemingly endless series of retaliatory wars fought with spears, bows and arrows-wars that we can watch in the film with fascination (Fig. 3). One side would manage to kill a member of the enemy, and then Figure 1. Figure 2. Figure 3. could celebrate the killing. But then the enemy had to avenge

that killing-and so, back and forth it went. Nor was it only warriors in battle who might be killed to avenge the ghosts. Anyone-a woman, a child caught unawares in an ambush, was equally fair game. In the film, we see the funeral of a young boy killed in just such an ambush. (Fig. 4).

How do the students react to this apparently "senseless" killing? They understand that it's not "senseless," that in fact it "makes sense" within the context of Dani beliefs and Dani culture. When I ask them whether such warfare and killing should be stopped by, say, some outside authority, their answer is almost unanimously a vehement "no!" Most of them have by now developed a thoroughly relativistic attitude.

There is one other Dani custom, however, that gives us pause. There is one more ritual that must be performed in order to placate the ghosts of the slain. Early in the morning, two or three young girls who are closely related to the dead person are brought to the funeral site, and there, with a sharp blow from a stone adze just like this one, each girl has two fingers chopped off (Fig. 5). Virtually all Dani women have lost two to six fingers in this way (Fig. 6). Just as you wince at the thought, so do the students. This custom they find harder to accept. Is it just ethnocentric narrow- mindedness and squeamishness, or is it something more?



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

Then, a bit later in the course, we read an account by Viktor Frankl of his experiences in the Nazi extermination camp at Auschwitz. Viktor Frankl managed to survive the horrors of the camps, along with a handful of other gaunt, emaciated near-skeletons of human beings (Fig. 7)-but some eleven million others died in the Nazi attempt at mass extermination of Jews and other so-called "inferior races" (Fig. 8). Well, I ask the students, what about this "quaint" cultural practice of the Nazis? Would anyone have been justified in trying to intervene in this practice-as, indeed, the Allies finally did? Shouldn't we simply try to understand this practice within the context of that culture, and not attempt to judge it by our own ethnocentric standards? Isn't this practice of equal dignity, equally valid, equally worthy of tolerance and respect?



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

Since virtually no one by this point is ready to grant respect and tolerance for that cultural practice, we have ourselves a conflict. How are we going to reconcile our acceptance of Dani killing with our rejection of Nazi killing?

-But wait: here is something else to read, a story by Nadine Gordimer that tells about life in South Africa under the policy of "apartheid," a story that shows a black man robbed of rights, of identity, even in death—a story that reveals some of the consequences of a policy of racism. Again I ask the students their reaction to **this** cultural practice—and again they have trouble granting it respect and tolerance.

By this point one of the basic tenets of cultural relativity is in trouble. Being non-judgmental, having respect and tolerance, accepting and not intervening, seem to be all right up to a point—but beyond that ill-defined point, we are having difficulty with the concept.

Now we see another film, one that shows us another aspect of the problem. This film is about the Nuer of southwestern Ethiopia, a black, handsome, cattle-herding people. But we see some Nuer children dying of smallpox, their faces and bodies covered with the eruptions and lesions of the disease (Fig. 9). The Nuer hold a special ceremony, asking the gods to relieve them of this scourge. They dance, they fire precious bullets into the air (Fig. 10), they sacrifice goats to the goddess



of the river. Figure 9. Figure 10. This is the Nuer way of dealing with smallpox. I ask: what's **our** way? Vaccination, comes the answer. Which way is **better**?, I ask. Whoops-we good relativists don't like questions like that. We've been taught not to judge, not to evaluate one way as better or worse than another. All ways, after all, are equally valid, and to claim that our way is better than others is to slip into the old trap of ethnocentrism. Besides, now you're challenging the validity of somebody's **religious** beliefs, and that violates an even more deeply rooted taboo.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

But I press them. Which way is more **effective**? Which way, prayers and sacrifices on the one hand, or vaccination on the other, does a more effective job of accomplishing the goal of eliminating smallpox? Now the answer comes, even if a bit reluctantly, and almost with embarrassment: yes, it is true that our way is more effective. In fact, this has just recently been demonstrated, in one of the most dramatic triumphs of modern Western medicine. Just one year ago this coming Friday, on May 8, 1980, the World Health Organization declared the total and complete eradication of the disease of smallpox all over the world. The smallpox virus had always been a major killer of mankind. In 1967 there had been an estimated 10 million cases of smallpox, 2 million of those fatal. Smallpox, being a highly contagious disease, respecting no national or societal boundaries, could be attacked only on a world-wide scale. That's what happened. Through a 13-year program of massive vaccination, almost two and a half billion people were vaccinated (Fig. 11), eradicating the disease in one area of Figure 11. the globe after another, until the last remaining cases were tracked down in Somalia and southern Ethiopia-the very area we had seen in our film. Those cases were cured, the last remaining people vaccinated-and after a two-year waiting period to be sure there would be no new cases, smallpox, that age-old killer of mankind, was declared eliminated from the face of the earth. Apparently, then, it **can** be demonstrated that some ways **are** better than others. We'll come back to the underlying principle involved in a little bit.

Let's join the class again. Here we're learning that the Arunta, an Australian aboriginal people, believed that women conceived babies by going too near trees or rocks where various totemic spirits lived. A frog spirit or lizard spirit would enter her body, and in time a baby would be born. The Trobriand Islanders, living on small islands off the east coast of New Guinea, had a similar belief, that pregnancy was caused by spirits that lurk in the water. If a woman waded in too deep, a spirit would enter her vagina, and thus she'd have a baby. The Trobrianders had plenty of experience with sexual intercourse, since premarital sex was freely indulged in, as well as sexual promiscuity after marriage on certain occasions as well-but the Trobrianders didn't make any connection between sexual intercourse and pregnancy. If a Trobriand woman didn't want to get pregnant, the rule was simple: "Don't go near the water."

Once again I ask a series of questions: are the Arunta and Trobriand beliefs that babies are caused by frog or water spirits entering the body of women **true** or **false**? That question is really a no-no, I find; I'm violating that same deepseated taboo against questioning anyone's religious beliefs. It's **true**, I hear in chorus, it's true-at least, it's true for **them**. What do they, the students, believe causes babies here in the U.S.A.? I hear something about sperm from a man meeting an ovum in a woman (Fig. 12), stemming from Figure 12. an activity called sexual intercourse. Yes, I've heard of that theory-supposedly a natural, biological process that constitutes reproduction in our species. Gee, I wonder aloud, I wonder whether the Arunta and the Trobrianders are also members of our human species, and subject to the same biological process of reproduction-or do they perhaps do it differently, with frog or water spirits? Well, the students agree they're fellow human beings, and so likely to reproduce via the same biological process that we do.



Figure 12.

So I pose the question a bit differently: are the sperm/ ovum theory and the frog/water-spirit theory of equal validity-or do they differ in validity, and if so, how and why? Well, it turns out that the Trobrianders themselves have already answered the question for us, it seems. About a year and a half ago my wife and I went to the Trobriand Islands, to try to find out whether beliefs and customs have changed there, or remained the same. We learned that the Trobrianders are as sexually active as ever, both premaritally and extramaritally-that hasn't changed, despite the best efforts of missionaries (Fig. 13). A Trobriander told us: "What's ours is **ours!**" But they've apparently found that the Western sperm/ovum theory does have a certain advantage over the water-spirit theory-namely, it **works** better when you want to slow down the rate of arrival of new little Trobrianders. We learned that there were two family-planning people on the island who visit the villages and provide contraceptives-and the Trobrianders find that method of controlling births a lot more effective than simply staying out of the water. So now these girls on their way home from school can safely "go near the water" (Fig. 14).



Figure 13.



Figure 14.

## Evaluation of Cultural Relativity

Well, these questions and problems that I confront my class with are pretty much the same kinds of questions that ultimately led me to become disillusioned with cultural relativity. At this point, let me now give you my present overall evaluation of the principle of cultural relativity. Let me show you what I think is right and good about it, and then what I think is wrong and bad about it-because like so much in life, it has, I think, both good and bad, and I wouldn't want us to throw out the baby with the bath water.

What's good and right about cultural relativity? Well, as a working rule for the anthropologist, I think it's very useful, even necessary, in order to gain as much objective understanding as possible about the culture he's studying. Chad Oliver has put it very well in his latest book: "An anthropologist in the field cannot go about exclaiming, 'How monstrous! How awful! Why, you people are **terrible!**' Moreover, the anthropologist cannot think this way either. There is no hope of understanding how a culture works if it is approached with contempt or loathing. At the very least, a suspension of judgment is required." I'd like to put it this way: **if** you want an objective, accurate understanding of another culture, **then** you'd do well to suspend value judgments about what you see and hear, and try to get an "inside" view of what the culture is all about, in its own terms. As a scientific tool, cultural relativity is demonstrably useful for achieving that goal.

OK, now, what's wrong, bad, invalid, insufficient about cultural relativity? Basically, there are two conclusions that relativists have drawn that I think are in error: the first is that all cultural practices are equally **valid**, and the second is that all cultural practices are equally **worthy of tolerance and respect**. Let's consider each in turn.

## Are All Cultural Practices Equally Valid?

I believe that the relativist conclusion that all cultures and all cultural practices are equally valid is based upon certain hidden, unstated assumptions that I believe just aren't correct. The first of these is the assumption that each culture, and each cultural practice, by performing positive functions for the people, "meets the needs" of that society, and thus in that sense is "valid."

Now it's true that every practice probably has some positive functions, **some** advantages for its practitioners. For instance, even the Nazi killing of six million Jews performed some beneficial functions for the Nazis—all the psychological and material benefits of scapegoating. But does that make the practice "valid"? The truth is that most practices, in addition to positive functions, have negative functions as well, disadvantages—the price that must be paid for the benefits. "There's no such thing as a free lunch," says the old slogan, and I believe it.

Also, I doubt that any culture meets all the needs of all its members. In short, I believe that all cultures are, to some greater or lesser extent, **imperfect**, and thus could be improved. But then, if all cultures are to some extent imperfect, must we conclude that all are **equally** imperfect?

This, then, brings us to the second hidden assumption of the relativist, namely, that there is no scientifically valid way to compare cultures, to rate or rank them, to say that one is better or worse than another. Now, in one way I agree—in the sense that I don't know of any valid way to compare entire cultures. But I do believe that many specific cultural practices and beliefs **can** be compared, **can** be demonstrated to be clearly better or worse, on a non-ethnocentric basis.

In fact, human societies have been doing this all through history. Despite the universal tendency to ethnocentrism, when societies have come in contact with other societies that had better tools, or weapons, or practices, ones that **worked** better than their own, most of the time, sooner or later, they have given up the old and adopted the new.



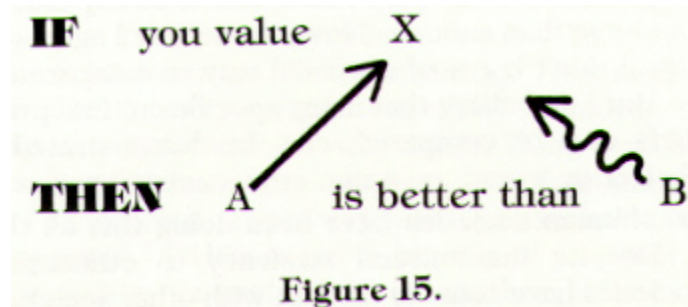
Examples? We've already seen two in our eavesdropping on my class. Which is better when it comes to eradicating smallpox: the Nuer way of shooting bullets and sacrificing goats, or our way of vaccination? Clearly, vaccination; it did work, the other did not. Which is better when it comes to controlling births: the Arunta/Trobriand way of avoiding rocks, trees, and water, or our way of contraceptives? Again, clearly, the contraceptives-and that's not just our own biased ethnocentric view, but the conclusion reached by the Trobrianders themselves, because they also, just as we did, learned that contraceptives enabled them to **predict** and **control** that aspect of their lives better than they could by dodging spirits in the water.

## The Pragmatic Principle

What's the basic principle underlying this kind of comparison? It's very simple: it's the **pragmatic** principle. That which **works** is "better" than that which **doesn't** work. Or more accurately, when people are given a choice, that which **works better**, to **achieve certain valued ends**, is what most people end up choosing, most of the time.

But what do I mean by "work better"? Any belief or practice that enables human beings to **predict** and **control** events in their lives, with a higher degree of success than previous beliefs or practices did, can be said to "work better." Better **prediction** and better **control** of events-those are the two essential ingredients that enable human beings to adapt better to the world around them.

I'd like to put that somewhat differently, in the form of a general formula that can then have even broader applicability - although I'll caution you right now that it won't work for everything, by any means-but we'll come back to that. Here's the formula (Fig.15):



Further examples are many, but let me show you just two more. Here are two axes (Figs. 16 and 17). The first I showed you before; more accurately, it's an adze, since the blade is transverse to the handle, rather than parallel to it-but that's not the point. It's from the Dani, in New Guinea, Figure 16. Figure 17. as I told you, and in addition to being used for chopping off little girls' fingers, it was more often used for chopping wood. Here, on the other hand, is an American steel axe, ground to a sharp edge. Which is better? In terms of the pragmatic formula, it's obvious: **If** you value being able to chop down trees and chop up wood with a minimum of human effort, **then** the steel axe is better than the stone adze. Nor is this just an ethnocentric notion of ours. The greater efficiency and utility of steel axes has never gone unnoticed by those peoples who had been previously using stone axes. In every case, once they've learned about steel axes, they've eagerly sought the more efficient steel tools-as, indeed, did two Dani men with whom I became friends. They each asked me, separately, to send them steel tools-an axe, and a machete -which they had learned about from missionaries. And in fact, when we returned home, I did send them-but not the baby cow they had also requested.



**Figure 18.**



**Figure 19.**

One more example (Figs. 18 and 19): here's a Dani arrow, given to me by one of my Dani friends. Look at it closely. See anything "missing"? Yes-it has no feathers on the end. Here's an American arrow for comparison; it's fletched with feathers, because long ago someone discovered that putting feathers on the end of an arrow will make it fly straighter and more steadily.

In other words, **if** you want to kill your adversary (be it human or animal) before he or it kills you, **then** putting feathers on the arrow is better than having no feathers. It just so happens that the Dani, who live in an incredibly remote valley deep in the interior of western New Guinea, have never discovered or learned from others about the principle of feathers on arrows-and so their warfare was somewhat less efficiently lethal than it might have been, as these arrows wobbled and fluttered and slowed in their flight.

However, the pragmatic principle can't be applied in **all** areas of culture. All the areas we've considered so far have been ones in which we've been concerned with choosing instrumental means toward specified ends: "If you want **this** end, then A will achieve it better than B." But some kinds of cultural activities are basically not instrumental, not means toward further ends, but rather they're performed as ends in themselves. When that's the case, the pragmatic test can't be applied. For example, take art. If a culture thinks of art as something that exists only for its own sake, but not as a means of achieving anything else, then I see no way of objectively demonstrating that one art form is better or worse than another. There it's strictly a matter of taste, of meeting whatever the local criteria might be for good art. In other words, there it's relative.

One further warning: so far I've given you examples in which, strangely enough, **our** ways seem to be the ones that are better than those of other people. One might almost suspect a hidden strain of ethnocentrism lurking in all this objective-sounding verbiage. However, we aren't always the winners. In some cases it might be a toss-up, and in others our way might be worse than others. Some examples:

We in the U.S. drive on the right, while the British drive on the left (the "wrong" side, as Americans sometimes ethnocentrically put it). Which is better? For the life of me, I can't think of any way in which either can be said to be better than the other. They're just **different** customs that seem to work equally well. Another: for a number of forms of mental illness and emotional disturbance, it's not at all clear that Western psychotherapy has achieved any **better** record of success than the practices of medicine men and so-called "witchdoctors" in other parts of the world. In fact, they may even have a better record of cures than we do. Finally, when it comes to dealing with the aged, I suspect that an awful lot of societies all around the world have devised much better ways of coping with the problems of aging than we have here in America.

So much for the relativists' conclusion that all cultural practices are equally valid. I've tried to show you why I don't agree with that conclusion, and how I believe we can demonstrate, in an objective, non-ethnocentric way, how some cultural practices are actually "better" than others.

## Are All Practices Equally Worthy of Tolerance and Respect?

Now let's turn our attention to the relativists' other major conclusion, that all cultural practices are equally worthy of tolerance and respect.

First of all, it should be noted that the doctrine of cultural relativity purports to be one of scientific objectivity and neutrality, designed to keep our investigations value-free. Various writers, however, have pointed out that cultural relativity, behind its facade of objectivity and neutrality, is actually a **moral** theory, one that is **not** objective and does **not** exclude value judgments. Raymond Firth, for instance, points out that "the affirmation that we should have respect and tolerance for the values of other cultures is itself a value which is not derivable from the proposition that all values are relative." Paul Schmidt points out that an "ought" statement cannot logically be derived from an "is" statement; that is, just because there **is** a wide variety of values and customs in the world does not logically require that we therefore **ought** to tolerate any of them. In fact, says Frank Hartung, cultural relativity is actually a moral theory that gives a central place to one value: **tolerance**.

Nor is it true that cultural relativity is a position of neutrality on value questions. In its tolerance and acceptance of whatever **is**, relativity is essentially lending its approval and support to the **status quo**, whatever that might be, as against any attempts to change or intervene in the **status quo**. Relativity ends up, then, as a basically conservative doctrine. As such, it's often opposed by would-be agents of change, of widely varying ideological persuasions—from religious missionaries, on the one hand, to radical reformers and revolutionaries on the other.

Be that as it may, cultural relativity still does stand for tolerance and respect. What could be wrong with that? **Aren't** all cultural practices equally worthy of tolerance and respect?

Well, in our classroom journey we encountered three cultural practices that I suspect many of us may have had trouble granting tolerance and respect: the Dani practice of chopping off little girls' fingers (Fig. 20), the Nazi extermination of eleven million human beings (Fig. 21), the South African practice of apartheid. Chad Oliver put our dilemma well: "It is one thing to

try to understand a culture in its own terms and recognize its values. It is quite another thing to stand idly by and watch Nazis stacking human beings in gas ovens (Fig. 22) , saying only, 'well, that's the way they do things in that culture.' "In other words, to tolerate anything and everything that's done in the world around us leads to a paralyzing inability to do anything at all to defend our own conceptions of the good and the right.



Figure 20.



Figure 21.



Figure 22.

But if we do agree that not all cultural practices are equally worthy of respect and tolerance, we're then faced with a very real problem: where and how do we draw the line? If we're to avoid the opposite extreme of complete ethnocentric intolerance, wiping out every custom that's not an identical clone of our own, how do we decide? And isn't tolerance, after all, a good and worthwhile value for a person who believes in liberal democracy, and the idea that people should be free to live as they choose?

## Tolerance in One's Hierarchy of Values

I look at it this way. Yes, I do value tolerance, and tolerance happens to be high up on my personal list of values. But we human beings have many values, not just one, and these values, when we stop to think about them, are arranged in our heads or hearts in a kind of hierarchy, a rank order, with some of our values being much more important to us than others. Sure, I value and enjoy strawberry ice cream, and I suppose it's there somewhere in my personal hierarchy of values. But compassion for my fellow human beings is a value that is much, much higher up on my list, being much more important to me than any flavor of ice cream.

Now, the advantage of thinking of values as existing in a hierarchy is that then we realize that if we should ever experience a **conflict** of values-something that happens frequently in life-the value that is lower in our hierarchy will have to yield to the one that is higher.

And this is precisely what's happening with our dilemma concerning tolerance. I imagine that many of us here, probably most of us, do value tolerance. After all, it's part of our liberal democratic heritage. But what happens when we encounter cultural practices such as the ones I've shown you today, the finger-chopping, the ovens for humans? Something very important, I think; let me explain.



**Figure 23.**

To do so, I'm going to give you one more example, one that I warn you you'll probably not enjoy, but it will help to make my point. This is a photograph of a seven-year-old African girl who has just had a ritual clitoridectomy (Fig. 23); that is, her clitoris and labia minora have just been cut out, without benefit of any anesthesia. She is one of some 30 million females in the world, most of them in Africa and Arab countries, who have undergone this removal of the focal point of female sexual pleasure. Many explanations are given for this ritual practice, but most of them seem to boil down to an attempt to reduce female sexual pleasure and thus ensure sexual fidelity. Now, how do you react to **this** custom? Do you find it "quaint," "interesting,"-or something else?

First of all, please notice that all these things-the fingerchopping, the ovens, the clitoridectomies-aren't being done to **us**, after all; so it could fairly be asked, why is it even any of our business?



Well, I believe that sometimes some of our most dearly held values, ones that are toward the very top of our hierarchy of values, are **deeply** outraged by events out there in the world, even though they don't threaten us personally or directly. What happens when our values are outraged in this way is that our circle of concern broadens. It widens beyond the limits of our own personal bodily self, or even our own family, our own community, even our own society. What we do then is to extend the boundaries, the limits of our sense of identity, of community, of who is included in the circle of "us." We now identify with those people "out there" as well. We empathize with them, we feel with them. Did you wince when I showed you the clitoridectomized girl? I know I did. Did you want to clutch yourself **there**? What hurts those people hurts us. "Compassion" is what it's called; we "suffer with" those others-and when that happens, respect and tolerance, both good but **lesser** values, have to go by the boards. Those practices we cannot accept, cannot tolerate. Somehow, in some way, we are moved to want to change them.

## Conclusion: Going Beyond Cultural Relativity

Let me try to move toward a conclusion. I feel that the doctrine of cultural relativity has served, and even continues to serve, a valuable function, that of gaining objective understanding. But in its refusal to compare, to evaluate, to judge, in its insistence on indiscriminate tolerance of every possible practice, it has tended to paralyze us in our ability to cope with the world we live in. This isn't a world composed only of small, isolated tribes with benign, quaint practices. The real world we inhabit is a rapidly shrinking one, with its peoples in increasingly close contact with each other. Some of those people have cultural practices that either threaten us directly, or else represent an assault on our most deeply-held values. What are we to do? How can we go **beyond** cultural relativity to cope with this world that presses in upon us?

First, I urge that we recognize that it's not only possible, but indeed desirable to compare, evaluate, and judge many cultural practices, not on the basis of a naïve ethnocentrism, or on the presumed possession of absolute standards, but rather from an objective, cross-cultural perspective. Such judging can be done in terms of the pragmatic "if. . . then. . ." formula that I presented earlier. Another example to remind you: "If you value your children's life, and don't want them to die of smallpox, **then** vaccination is better than goat sacrifice."

Please notice the way this approach employs values. It doesn't **impose** any one set of values on anyone; rather, it **asks**, what **do** you value? **If** you value X, then. . . and so on. Once the value has been established, then there's a basis for evaluations and judgments.

To be sure, not everyone in the world has the same values, as we all know. But on the other hand, in many areas of life we may find more consensus on basic values than we thought, and therefore we may develop greater agreement on means toward those ends as well-as was the case with the example I just gave you. It turned out that an awful lot of the world's people **did** value their children's lives, and **did** want them not to die of smallpox-and so they went along with vaccination instead of their former practices. Might we achieve other consensuses in the future as well, on other values that are also dear to our hearts?

Interestingly enough, human history **has** shown some value convergences, some achievement of consensus. Headhunting is practically a thing of the past-and even though a dyed-in-the-wool relativist might regret the passing of this "noble" custom that undoubtedly performed important functions for those who hunted heads, I suspect that the potential **victims**-the "donors" for this quaint practice-were happy to see the passing of the custom. Slavery, too, is virtually eliminated from the earth-so it **is** possible to achieve **some** consensus on important values.

Second, I urge that as we compare, evaluate, and judge, that we make our values explicit. We need to be aware of what our values are, of course; examine them, think them through, become aware of what order they stand in our own personal hierarchy of values. But then I urge that we not be bashful; let's speak up for our values, each of us; let's express them, even attempt to persuade others to share them with us. I don't fear this process; rather, I welcome it. If it should turn out that our values are actually narrow and parochial and are only self-serving, I'm sure that others will rapidly let us know by their reaction. If, on the other hand, our values should touch a responsive chord in others, if they should agree, "Yes that **would** be good, that **would** make for a better world," why, then perhaps we'd all be a little bit closer to achieving consensus on the kind of world we could all live in, in peace and harmony.

Try substituting **your** most cherished value in there, and then try to envision what I'm advocating. What is it? Love? Compassion? Peace? Human dignity? Justice? A sense of human brotherhood/sisterhood? Whatever it is, I guess the message I've been aiming at all through this rambling talk is that we shouldn't have to feel embarrassed and guilty about having values, standing up for them, advocating them, trying to persuade others that they're well worth adopting. I think we've been hampered too long by demands for tolerance and respect in a world that increasingly doesn't offer any in return. In a world filled with all kinds of evil things (as viewed, to be sure, from our value perspective) I feel that something can be said for a certain degree of **intolerance**. Some things, I feel, should not be tolerated, and I suspect that many of you out there may agree with me. If so, here's a way to start doing something about it: let's stand up for what we believe in, and tell others about it. That kind of discussing and sharing of values just might lead to something good. Why don't we go out of here and give it a try?