

Relativism/Absolutism

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This dichotomy is one of the most fundamental of the antitheses of the social sciences: it becomes evident in the problem of understanding different cultures. Clifford Geertz says that the problem of culture clash that was familiar to anthropologists is now becoming common for everyone with the 'deprovincialisation of the world' through the global phenomena of immigration and refugees and via television which brings us news of other people and their often 'repellent beliefs' (1995: 44). The dichotomy has been present since the formulation of the concept of sociology in the nineteenth century and is present with us now at the end of the twentieth century. From Comte to postmodernism, sociologists embrace a form of relativism and oppose it to conceptions of the absolute for different reasons. At this moment, with postmodernism and poststructuralism, relativism is embraced on the basis that it leads to tolerance, and absolutism is condemned for underpinning terror and oppression. Certainly the worst oppressors of the twentieth century, Hitler and Stalin, claimed a fixed and absolutist point – the master race and its historical destiny, or revolutionary scientific socialism achievable through the laws of historical necessity – from which to eradicate all elements of **difference**.

The problem is, how do we characterize the absolute and the relative? Can relativism be coherently formulated and does its triumphant assertion guarantee tolerance? Does it help with the methodological and epistemological problems of a social science in understanding other cultures – in understanding difference?

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A PRELIMINARY DEFINITION

The absolute can be defined as that which has unconditioned existence, that which is not conditioned by or relative to anything else. An example of this might be the Christian idea of God. In nineteenth-century philosophy, the German idealist movement made free use of such a concept – particularly Hegel's idea of spirit (*Geist*) as a spiritual self-moving, self-knowing principle that underlies all things, but reveals itself in the different moments of culture and history. The latter are the changing and relative and the former the absolute. Marxism developed out of Hegelianism, in part by introducing historical determinism and relativism, and so denying that there is anything fixed and unchanging in history. Modern forms of relativism, in postmodernism for example, also establish relativism by rejecting Hegel and the conception of the absolute.

In contrast to the absolute, the relative is that which has conditioned existence, that which depends on something else. It is thus finite as opposed to infinite, contingent as opposed to necessary, dependent as opposed to independent, **variable** as opposed to invariable, and changeable as opposed to eternal. However the concepts 'finite', 'contingent', 'dependent', 'variable' and 'changeable' are associated with the relative but are not one and the same as the relative. Thus one could say that the proposition 'It is raining today' is contingently true because tomorrow it will not rain and therefore it will not be true. But it is not relative because it does not depend on my perception of judgement; it is a state of affairs, and thus its truth is not relative to me.

What does 'relative' as opposed to the absolute mean? We could say 'relative' means 'relative to': it is an incomplete term. This concept of *relative to* must be regarded as the core of relativism. However we have still not arrived at relativism, because it could still be argued that X is relative to Y, and Y is something fixed. Thus we could argue that cultures are relative to needs – biological, psychological – and these are fixed and universal amongst all human beings. But the true doctrine of relativism is the denial that there are any fixed terms at all. Cultural relativists would argue that we can only understand needs through the lenses of culture, and cultures vary: therefore there is no fixed point from which to determine need. Relativism is thus associated with the perspectival: what is true is relative to **perspective**, and perspective varies. In this sense relativism is linked with the observation of **diversity**. We must recognize what Geertz calls 'unabsolute truths' (1995: 44).

We can see the difference between the absolute and the relative in terms of morality. Moral absolutism is the doctrine that certain actions are always wrong no matter what the circumstances and no matter what the consequences. Even more strongly, certain actions are held to be intrinsically wrong and this stricture cannot be overridden by considerations of circumstances. Moral relativists will on the contrary say it is precisely the

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circumstances that determine what counts as right or wrong. Thus Émile Durkheim (1974a: 43) argued that it is society that determines whether an action will be judged as right or wrong: murder in time of war is justifiable homicide, whilst in peace it is condemned and punished. This shows the variability in both definition and regulation of action. Thus action is right or wrong according to culture, and culture will vary. Enormous weight is thus put on the propositions that cultures determine what counts as true and right, and that cultures vary. These two propositions are the central pivots of cultural relativism. They are taken as establishing the variability of truth and morality. But is the concept of culture hard or clear enough to establish and justify relativism in terms of morality and knowledge? That female infanticide has been routinely practised for centuries in certain parts of the world is surely not enough to justify it.

There is however a paradoxical quality to the central proposition of relativism: all is relative. Firstly, it has a peculiar ring of absolutism about it. How can it be asserted so absolutely that all is relative? Most importantly, what kind of proposition is this? Is it empirically true? If so, its truth depends on a patient observation of all cultural, social, moral and political forms. In this case it cannot yet be said to be conclusively proved. However, secondly, the empirical nature of the relativist case is important: it is the observation of difference that is the strongest case for the relativist. Yet if the central proposition of relativism is not empirical, what kind of proposition is it? It is not logically true, for we are not involved in a contradiction if we deny that everything is relative. It thus has a peculiar epistemological status.

It is clear that it is easier to define relativism negatively, by denying the absolute, than by saying positively what relativism is. However, generally, relativism can be taken to mean that there is no absolute definition of truth or reality; thus what is true and what is real is simply what people claim to be so. It means that there is no divine, cosmological or universal arbiter of the competing claims to truth and reality: there are no absolutes. This claim has moral and cognitive dimensions, and in the social sciences it has methodological dimensions which must be evaluated before relativism is accepted.

COMTE: THE RELATIVE AND THE ABSOLUTE

Auguste Comte claimed that 'all is relative' is the only absolute proposition. He has the honour of founding sociology, or more accurately devising the name. (It is still too early to say whether he did this in one of his periodic attacks of insanity.) In the 48th lesson of his famous *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–42) he declared that 'the inevitable passage from the absolute to the relative constitutes one of the most important philosophical results of

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each of the intellectual revolutions which have successively led the different orders of our speculation from the purely theological and metaphysical state to the truly scientific' (1975: 203). He opposed the ancient manner of studying being in terms of first and final causes, which is absolute, by the scientific approach of studying law and phenomena, which is relative. It is clear that he does not mean relative in the sense of relative to each person and their 'subjective' viewpoint. Objective knowledge is possible for him, and this consists in the grasping of the laws of reality which is immanent in the structure of the world, and as such bypass the human subjective viewpoint. Laws are relations between facts, and these must be observable: there can be no knowledge of essences. In sociology, the last of the positive sciences to develop, knowledge is governed by the historical method, which says that all forms of thought and historical period pass through three stages: the theological, the metaphysical and the positive. Thus although Comte pointed to historical variability and difference between epochs epistemologically and politically, he postulated one invariable law that governs this. Durkheim in Chapter 5 of *The Rules of Sociological Method* rejects the claim that there is one invariable law which governs all of human development and that there is one humanity to which it applies: instead we must recognize that there are diverse types of society and that they thus have their own individuality.

THE GREEK EXPERIENCE: NATURE/CULTURE

As Geertz shows it is the experience of culture contact that forces the awareness of diversity. The ancient Greeks as a trading nation were the first to experience culture contact. They grew to reflect on the phenomena of culture or 'civilization' through their contact with the civilizations of Persia, Babylon and Egypt, but also the more 'primitive' Scythians and Thracians. They were inclined to dismiss most as 'barbarians', in contrast to Hellenism. But this contact eventually led to questions as to whether various ways of life, religions and ethical codes were merely conventions, and therefore non-natural. Did Hellenism have a sacred ordinance, in contrast to the barbarians?

They formulated these questions into theoretical reflections fundamental to both sociology and philosophy. Lévi-Strauss argued that the distinction between nature and culture is essential to the foundation of a human science. Here we have a first definition of the relative and the absolute: we can define nature as what is necessary, unchangeable and universal and culture as that which is made by human beings, and therefore variable, contingent and changeable.

The Sophists, in Greek philosophy, were the first relativists (Guthrie 1971). They came to treat of culture and human beings in a microcosmic

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rather than a macrocosmic way. Sophism has been described as the process of human beings becoming self-conscious. They acknowledged the presence of the subject in the determination of reality and argued that what is real is determined by the subject of perception. They rejected the old 'theological' way of doing philosophy amongst the thinkers who are now known as the Presocratics – that is to find one ultimate constituent to reality (fire, earth, air, etc.) and one principle by which it can be explained. In contrast to this monistic theoretical tendency, the Sophists observed a wide diversity of facts, particularly about human beings and their beliefs. From this they concluded that what is true is relative to the perception of the human being, and what is just and morally right is relative to the interest or power of the person.

PROTAGOREAN RELATIVISM

Protagoras is the most famous of the Sophists and his statement the most famous statement of relativism: 'Man is the measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are, of the things that are not, that they are not.' How is this statement to be interpreted? Does 'man' here mean the individual, the group or the species? These entail three different types of relativism. But each of these types constitutes a rejection of the concept of truth *simpliciter*, and thus any conception of an absolute truth. Truth always means 'truth for': truth is always true for the individual, the group or the species (Guthrie 1971: 181–92).

Species relativism

This is really a form of humanism, and it stands opposed to forms of deism and the absolutism entailed by the conception of a God. Nietzsche's famous statement 'God is dead' means that human beings are alone in the cosmos, and we only have ourselves to guide us. The claim that all truths are human truths is central to the humanism of Feuerbach, which so influenced Marx. Although this contains the essential element of relativism that 'true' does not stand alone, but means 'true for', it could entail a universal truth – that which is true for humanity. Thus 'true for' here does entail the kind of relativism that we will look at later.

We have seen that Comte developed the idea that knowledge and science are relative to humanity, and that what counts as true is relative to the stage of history and intellectual development which humanity has reached. However the knowledge of the positive stage for Comte is more adequate and comprehensive, because it is scientific and deals with phenomenal

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realities and not fictions: it is thus the final stage of the process. The philosopher Kant in the eighteenth century argued that all knowledge is relative to the faculty of understanding; there is no knowledge of 'the thing in itself', but an objective knowledge of reality is still possible because of human reason. Further, a universal ethic is possible because of the activity of human reason.

Kantian ethics develops the conception of what is true for humanity in an ethical sense: right action is universal. This conception of true for humanity could entail a standard for universal human rights now, just as it constituted a standard for the socialist humanism of many nineteenth-century figures, Marx included.

Individual relativism

However, Protagoras's statement could also mean 'man' as individual human being. Thus it means that truth means 'true for' the individual; knowledge means knowledge for the individual; and morality means morality for the individual. This is pervasive in a certain contemporary common sense, for example the debate stopper 'It all depends on what you mean by' or 'It's up to the individual.' The conclusion of this is that the individual is the sole judge of what is true, what is right, and that logically there are no standards beyond this that can be invoked as a critique or as a standard of truth or morality, whereby certain positions can be judged false or inadequate. It means there are no general epistemological or moral standards, beyond what people may happen accidentally to agree on. It was this particularly that enraged Plato and triggered his attack on Sophism, and indeed founded Western rationalism.

Plato's response

Through his mouthpiece in the dialogues, Socrates, Plato argues that knowledge is real and it is founded on general definitions. Individualist relativism is thus self-defeating because to make any claim to knowledge is to invoke a criterion that the individual did not invent. Plato's argument against this type of relativism particularly occurs in the dialogue the *Theaetetus*, where his method is to extract the full implications of the argument, and then to show that this is incompatible with the criteria of knowledge which must be (a) infallible and (b) of 'what is'. Amongst his arguments are the following, which could be adapted to the situation of the social sciences.

Firstly, Plato argues that if knowledge is relative to the individual, then no person is wiser than any other, and then no one has any justification for

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setting themselves up as a teacher, and in particular for taking money for it. Here he is attacking not just the logical side of Sophism, but the commercial aspect of their teaching, the 'art and control of life'. This argument could be adapted against those who purport to teach and therefore impart knowledge, and use ratiocination to do both, but undermine this possibility by arguing that reason is either masculinist oppression or Enlightenment terror.

Secondly, he argues that if knowledge is relative to the individual and their perceptions then I could never be mistaken. But we know that it is possible to believe something to be true, which in fact turns out to be false. Thus, for example, the belief that the earth was flat later turned out to be a mistaken one. That there was a British Flat Earth Society long after the invention of the telescope is testimony to the power of belief over evidence. However, many of the beliefs that occupy social scientists do not have such possibilities of testing; and indeed it may be that testing them is strictly irrelevant to the sociological interest in them. Thus whether witches really exist is irrelevant to an interest in the role of witchcraft beliefs in any particular society.

Thirdly, Plato argues that a great part of knowledge consists in judgements which do not rely on individual perception or assent at all. Plato's clearest example is in mathematics. It does not matter what I feel or think about parallel lines: it is still true that they never meet. Equally whether I know anything about black holes, they still exist. Further, to make any claims about them I must invoke certain criteria or terms by which I identify them which are not reducible to my judgement, for example certain features of space, time, causality. Thus knowledge has certain features which means it transcends my judgement. Plato developed this into his theory of forms of reality which are eternal cognitive absolutes on which all knowledge rests. Aristotle developed Platonism into the claim that far from our perceptions and judgements being the measure of reality, it is reality which must be the measure of the amount and worth of our cognition. This division between reality as it is and appearance is central to the concept of ideology. And this Aristotelian realism has entered into Marxist philosophies of science in the twentieth century.

One of the main conclusions of sophistic relativism is that morality and justice are not real in the sense that they imply something beyond the interest or power of the individual. Thus justice is simply power, and in particular established power. The character Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic* represents this view. Plato argued against this that the concept of justice involves a non-relative standard. For him this implies an absolute standard of justice. This in turn should be the foundation of the social order. For Plato, this was not present in any contemporary society. In the *Republic* he founded the concept of social organization and indeed societal critique on a non-relativistic conception of justice.

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Social and cultural relativism

The third way in which we can interpret Protagoras's statement is that 'man' means the culture or society. This constitutes social or cultural relativism, which is central to the human sciences to the extent that it now seems almost a truism. Logically this develops Socrates's arguments about general definitions as lying at the heart of knowledge, but adds that it is the culture or society which establishes the general definitions. Thus, this form of relativism says that there are many and varied forms of general definitions, and that this variety depends on the variety and extent of 'conceptual schemes' or 'cultural codes' or social systems. 'True for' means true for the conceptual scheme or culture; there are no shared meanings or moral standards between groups. Plato moved from general to universal real essences. However this version of relativism avoids universalism by identifying meaning as that which is shared between a number of persons. For the social sciences it is the group or the society which is the foundation for general definitions, and thus the foundation of knowledge. That which is general or shared is the foundation of knowledge. This stands as a critique of individualist relativism, for each person can only make sense of reality or make moral decisions by reference to shared standards.

Geertz in *Local Knowledge* (1993) argues that the truth of cultural relativism is that we can never apprehend another culture as though it were our own. We can only look at such cultures by looking through and not behind the 'significant systems' of culture, which consists in 'the tangle of hermeneutic involvements' (1993: 45). That is we are always involved not just in seeing how they see the world, but in the problem of interpreting their systems of beliefs.

The clearest definition of social cultural relativism is that offered by Peter Winch in his book *The Idea of a Social Science* (1958), which applies the ideas of the later Wittgenstein to the methodological problems of the social sciences. The conception of meaning is central to Winch's analysis and involves conventions and rules that are shared and unique to the culture or society from which they derive. It follows then that we can identify the action of agents only by employing the concepts used in that culture. We cannot understand the action of the agents using concepts that are not used by the agent or not available to the culture or society concerned.

Peter Winch develops this to a logical form of conceptual relativism which argues that the very acts of judgements of identity and reality are made in a 'form of life' which is shared between a number of persons. It follows that it is these shared cognitive relations which define what is true and what is real. Thus truth and reality are strictly relative to a form of life and there are many forms of life. And since what is true and what is real can only be determined from within a form of life, it makes no sense to argue for a comparative position between forms of life. In particular we cannot use concepts and methods drawn from Western science to

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understand non-scientific cultures. This is the case for the above philosophical reasons, but of course it follows from the logic of his argument that there are no transcultural concepts that can be applied from one form of life to another.

Winch applies these concepts in his article 'Understanding a Primitive Society' (1970), which became a central plank in what is now known as the rationality debate. One argument here is that Western science is held by some to provide a non-context-dependent access to reality. Winch criticizes Evans-Pritchard in this paper. Evans-Pritchard argues that a scientific approach is as much a function of our culture as a magical approach is of certain other cultures, and acknowledges that there is no superiority for scientific thinking. Indeed he ran his household according to the Azande way and found it as satisfactory as any other. However, Evans-Pritchard does assume that there is a checking point for the real that is independent of cultural form. In this he assumes it has 'absolutist' status. He assumes that scientific notions are in accordance with objective reality. For Winch, on the other hand, we can only talk of the real through language and its concepts: reality is not what gives language sense, it is language that give reality sense, and this is formed in diverse kinds of life.

Contemporary relativists argue similarly in terms of the concept of 'conceptual scheme': it is impossible to understand or communicate anything without employing either a language or a conceptual scheme. Any language, or indeed science, is dependent on such a conceptual scheme. Conceptual schemes vary and there is no vantage point independent of such a scheme by which we can judge the scheme itself. A radical version of this is that these schemes are 'incommensurable' with each other. We find this line of thinking in the writings of Feyerabend, Kuhn and Whorf.

SOME PROBLEMS WITH CONCEPTUAL RELATIVISM

Firstly, conceptual relativism in practice would appear to be contradicted every time we try to understand a culture or science or historical period different from our own. It would appear to be contradicted each time scientists build on past scientific theories. According to this position it finally makes no sense to try to understand another conceptual scheme – let alone succeed, even if only partially. One couldn't say 'I don't think I have grasped all the concepts of Tibetan Buddhism.' We can have no sense of adequacy or even failure of our attempt to do so. Further we are by implication prisoners of our own conceptual scheme. We cannot move on, change or disagree. A radical sociological and conceptual determinism is entailed by this position. Questions like 'How did this scheme originate?', 'How adequate is it?', 'What interests or needs does it serve?' are apparently impossible to formulate, because they imply what is denied: a vantage

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point independent of the scheme. But it is precisely these kinds of questions that are central not only to an adequate sociological investigation, but to a perfectly human reflection on our own variety as a species and indeed evaluation of different forms of belief – perhaps even with a view to adopting such alternative ways of life as one's own.

Methodological critiques of Winch argue that this position, rather than showing how sociological understanding is possible, entails that it is impossible. Most strongly, it fails to show how we move between forms of life. But even if we could, how do we match concepts from different forms of life? We may have interests that are not necessarily at one with any of the forms of life we are studying. Is sociology a form of life itself? Even so, there is no explanation of how it applies to other forms of life with different assumptions from its own. Nor is there any clear sense of what a form of life is. In like manner MacIntyre (1970) criticizes Winch because the social sciences must be able to call on concepts that do not form part of the linguistic rules of a group – the concept of the unconscious, for example.

Ernest Gellner (1974) argues that relativism is a problem for the social sciences, not a solution to its difficulties. How can we get to know other cultures without using concepts that imply some non-relativist, transcultural criteria? He argues that science requires 'one world'. He is particularly opposed to Winch's 'symmetrical relativism', which assumes all cultures have equal cognitive power. Here he has in mind the Western industrial system as having greater capacity to answer need than pre-literate, pre-industrial societies. Thus it is in this, if not in any other way, not of the same cognitive status as other cultures.

CAN RELATIVISM BE CONSISTENTLY FORMULATED?

It has been remarked that no one lives as a relativist. We look left and right before we cross the road even if we are in Katmandu. We are appalled by the atrocities of Saddam Hussein against his own people. It is in the seminar or lecture room that relativism has its most persuasive force.

Mandelbaum (1982) uses the expression 'conceptual relativism' to indicate the view that statements are relative to an intellectual and conceptual background against which they make sense. It involves a distinction drawn by the philosopher Kant in the eighteenth century between the data of sense, which is given to the faculty of sensibility, and the organization of these data by the faculty of understanding. Now Kant did not infer the relativity of knowledge from this. Rather he argued that all people share certain fundamental concepts, 'categories', such as causality or quality. All knowledge and reality were possible on this basis, and therefore this knowledge is universal. However, in the nineteenth century thinkers argued

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that the concepts which order the data of sense differ, particularly from society to society and from historical epoch to historical epoch. Durkheim (1964b) in particular argued that categorial schemes vary according to society. It is then argued that each different conceptual scheme employs different criteria of truth and reality. So what counts as true or as real varies from scheme to scheme.

Donald Davidson, in his famous article 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' (1986), argues that the conditions that establish the radical relativism of a conceptual scheme can never be achieved. Davidson argues that the idea of a conceptual scheme itself is not coherent. He raises the question as to whether the argument for absolute difference of conceptual scheme be made. That is, can we prove that they are 'incommensurable' with each other? This involves the claim that if such schemes are languages (they could equally be scientific theories for Thomas Kuhn), they are not translatable into each other. A relativist will argue that there is no fixed stock of meanings or a theory-neutral reality which is a ground of comparison between these schemes. However, there is for Davidson a paradox about this version of relativism, which entails that it cannot be clearly formulated and therefore must fail. We can only establish that we have radically different conceptual schemes if we fail to translate. And if we get near enough to another language to say, for example, 'Well, they describe chairs differently from us', then this is a language like our own, or like enough for the non-translatability thesis to fail. That is, we have failed to show that it is radically non-translatable.

And there is this further paradox: we can only make sense of different points of view if we can agree on 'a common coordinate system on which to plot them'; and 'The existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability' (1984: 67). Thus for example in terms of comparing different forms of the family, anthropologists compare different ways of childrearing only because they can identify the child and the parent in the first place. That is, they can only identify difference in families because they accept certain fixed data (the child) as that to which different practices attach. Thus there is no failure of translation or understandability between cultures here, even though there is difference.

This argument involves what Richard Rorty (1972) calls a 'verificationist' view – that is, that there is some stuff of the world, be it things or events, which are the condition for truth. And without this we cannot have a criterion for the difference of conceptual schemes – or their success or failure of translation. Rorty argues however that the difference between the ancient Greeks and ourselves does amount to a difference in conceptual schemes, because there are radically different concepts involved, i.e. there are non-translatable features of it. Mandelbaum (1982) argues that a consistent version of conceptual relativism can never be made, for all relativists have to implicitly make non-relativist assumptions. For example, Kuhn was forced to admit that rival scientific theories referred to the same

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set of facts, and without this they could not have been rivals. So Whorf, in his conception of comparative linguistics, assumed that different language users were referring to the same objects. Thus scientific theories and languages are not self-enclosed systems but refer to aspects of a world that is independent of the system of reference. So scientific disagreement is possible only because they can refer to the same set of facts over which there is disagreement.

Bernard Williams (1972) argues that there is a type of vulgar relativism which is self-contradictory. It maintains firstly that 'right' means 'right for a given society'. And secondly, that it is wrong for people in one society to condemn or interfere with the moral actions or values of another culture. But in the first claim it says all uses of 'right' are relative to a society, whilst in the second it uses 'wrong' in a non-relative way.

IS RELATIVISM ITSELF RELATIVE?

The doctrine of relativism now appears to be axiomatic for the social sciences. This has not always been so; the theory of relativism is stressed or downplayed, and thus is itself relative to social and historical factors. That is, the acceptance of relativism itself is socially and historically specific. We have seen that relativism as a theory grew under certain conditions in ancient Greece. Specifically, this was the period covering the end of tribalism. Alvin Gouldner in *Enter Plato* (1967) argued that this marked the end of a period of certainty about what should be done and believed. The rules which established social practice were themselves to be defined by consensual definition and not referred to tradition.

So also at the end of the Victorian era, there was a rejection of its imperialist absolutes: Sumner's adage 'the mores make anything right' reflects this rejection of absolutes. And after the experience of German fascism in World War II, there was in anthropology a turning away from relativist definitions of culture: Kroeber and the concept of universal categories of culture reflects the attempt to find what all human beings share.

TOWARDS AN EVALUATION OF RELATIVISM

In attempting to evaluate the various types of relativism in the context of the social sciences, it is worth bearing in mind the following reflections.

Firstly, is it true that because beliefs are held by people, this *ipso facto* makes them right? Clitoridectomy is practised widely in the world: the

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consequences are pain and mutilation for the women of those societies. Are there not criteria other than habit and tradition for the maintenance of a belief system?

Secondly, are cultures and historical periods self-contained moral and epistemic units, about which nothing further can be said or done? Might it not be the case that the cultural relativist is paradoxically introducing culture or society as a fixed term by which to establish relativism? It is the axiom of the social sciences that all is relative to culture or society. But if these are not fixed entities then we cannot coherently close any argument that a practice must be justified because it is relative to the culture? What are cultures? And are the limits of cultures and historical periods the limits of rational and moral discourses? If so, then German fascism was one such unit, and thus just a different morality. The way the world is moving now, the concept of a self-contained cultural unit is part of history.

Thirdly, the unacceptable face of moral relativism is that it appears to entail no critique of fascism. A relativist could of course argue that what was wrong with fascism is precisely that it didn't recognize and respect difference. Here the acceptable face of relativism is that it tolerates difference and diversity in ways of living and being. But this relies on the universal proposition that we should respect difference in other people. That is, we can only accept the relative because of an absolute moral value of respect for difference.

Fourthly, is there nothing that human beings everywhere share cognitively and morally? Winch must, like Dilthey, hold implicitly to some form of philosophical anthropology, which assumes certain central features of a common humanity. For Winch this must be the capacity to make sense of the rules. Does this not constitute a form of bridge notion between forms of life? This may of course be the basis for examining difference, but it could also point to a limitation of radical diversity of forms of life. We know what need and desperation look like even if we do not share witchcraft beliefs with a culture we might be trying to help. Winch himself clearly does not want to accept the unacceptable consequence of social/conceptual relativism, that of moral relativism. And in 'Nature and Convention' (1978) he argues that there are certain features which are essential to the very condition of a society. In the world situation today there is widespread abuse of human rights, but at the same time a recognition of the existence of universal human rights.

Fifthly, is it not the case that examining social beliefs to some extent involves going beyond them, to look for their extent, influence and social foundation? In other words, surely social beliefs are the data for the social scientist, not the final court of appeal? They can be analysed, explained, not always necessarily justified, simply because they exist.

Sixthly, Comte introduced an anti-absolutism and thus a form of relativism, but nevertheless introduced the comparative method, which was influential on Durkheim and subsequent sociology.

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BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

Finally, 'so the question is what do we do' (Geertz 1995) in this sea of 'unabsolute truths'? Does the recognition of difference establish tolerance or does it underwrite the conflict between religions, cultures, classes, races and sexes? Relativism is not just an issue of judgement but also one of practical consciousness, for it is a matter of what we do and believe. Can we not hold on to an ideal of what human beings all share rather than what differentiates them from each other? Durkheim introduced cultural relativism into the social sciences. He can have the last say here with his universal ideal of humanism, that is the last absolute that can be discovered in difference.

Thus we make our way, little by little, towards a state, nearly achieved as of now, where the members of a single social group will have nothing in common amongst themselves except their humanity, except the constitutive attributes of the human person in general. This idea of the human person, given different nuances according to the diversity of national temperaments, is therefore the only idea which would be retained, unalterable and impersonal, above the changing torrent of individual opinions . . . Consequently nothing remains which men can love and honour except man himself. (Durkheim 1973: 51-2)

KEY CONCEPTS

RELATIVISM Any theory in the social sciences is said to be relativistic if it cannot provide truth criteria independent of or outside of itself; that is, it is self-sustaining. Similarly if we seek to justify the practices that exist within a particular society because that is the ways that they have always done them we are similarly being relativistic. Relativism is an extremely tolerant way of understanding things but it allows no criteria for judging what is good or bad; true or false.

ABSOLUTISM In philosophy absolutism is the form of belief that argues in terms of the existence of absolute qualities. These might crystallize around an idea of God, or they might be more secular and contain formal and uncontested notions of truth and falsity; rightness and wrongness; good and evil, and so on. Absolutisms tend not to be open for negotiation.

Difference Difference is a more formal idea than diversity and it implies that there is a categorical segregation between particular social forms. People relate not so much according to a recognition of the diversity but in accord with an acknowledgement of their identity and difference.

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Variable A variable is a conceptual feature of an analysis. In real life all kinds of things influence our behaviour but as sociologists we have to restrict our explanations to two or three causal features that are common to social groups not just individuals. I might, therefore, explain someone's behaviour in terms of their class, their gender and their ethnicity. These are three variables. They vary because one may have more influence on action than another in any particular circumstance.

Perspective This term is used widely in sociology to talk about different ways of seeing, different ways of interpreting and different ways of experiencing social reality. So you might suppose that a Marxist and a non-Marxist have different perspectives on things.

Diversity This concept implies a wide range of forms or manifestations of a social phenomenon. Social class appears in this society but in a diversity of ways; that is, there are some things in common to them all but there is variance between them.