

**DESCRIPTION AND EVALUATION  
(A CRITICAL STUDY OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM  
WITH REFERENCE TO THE VIEWS OF KARL  
POPPER AND IAN JARVIE)**

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**Abstract:** According to cultural relativism any statement of any kind is, basically, culture or language specific. We cannot transcend culture. We cannot and should not evaluate the culture of other people in the light of our own. We should not be judgmental in this regard. This will lead to Ethnocentrism according to which one's own culture is better than the culture of others and according to which one's own culture can be a criterion for judging and evaluating the cultures of other people. Karl Popper and Ian Jarvie are of the opinion that this will lead to the impossibility of knowledge. If we accept the radical views of cultural and cognitive relativism, the objectivity and universality of knowledge will be impossible. Jarvie points out that without any judgment or criticism what will be the use of Anthropology? Popper suggests that the cross cultural debate is not impossible though difficult. New ideas cannot be produced only by description but by criticism and evaluation.

**Key Words:** Cultural Relativism, Cognitive Relativism, Impossibility of Knowledge, Culture Specific, Language Specific, Ethnocentrism, Description, Evaluation.

## **Introduction**

Cultural relativism upholds the view that we cannot evaluate any culture because in this process we, usually, give value judgment to the cultures of others according to our own enculturation. This sort of judgment is nothing but a mental habit or mental conditioning. On the basis of mere mental conditioning any judgment or evaluation cannot be appreciated. For example in France wine is used in almost every meal and French people sometimes allow the children to use it. This practice cannot be appreciated in America. In many Muslim countries, Muslim women cover their whole body while the dresses of European women are very different. It is easy not to comment or give value judgment in these cases but what should we do when the problem is of basic human rights or when the problem is of knowledge or a way to get knowledge very different from our own? For example in ancient India there has been a cultural practice called 'sati'. According to this tradition a woman should burn alive on the death of her husband. Some women did this horrible act on their own will and some did because of the great social pressure. What should be the stand point of cultural relativism on this? Should it consider a cultural practice or a crime against humanity? Mental habits have something to do with feelings but these habits can be thought out. There is a very famous saying of Mark Twain "we all do not end of feelings, and we mistake it for thinking." The thinking process or the process of reconsideration can be started within one's culture or it can be thought out from outside. Contrary to the claims of cultural relativists, the development of any culture demands interactions and conflicts with different cultures. When we see a thing from outside and with a proper detachment, we can see it properly. It is true that we should not be judgmental to the culture of other people but it is like going too far to declare that we cannot transcend culture or we are determined by it.

## **The Argument**

"Judgments are based on experiences, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation" (Herskovits 1972, 12). In other words he is saying that we cannot judge or evaluate any culture. Herskovits contrasts relativism not only with Absolutism but also with Ethnocentrism, "Ethnocentrism is the point of view that one's own way of life is to be preferred to all others" (21).

In other words if a person does not believe in moral and cognitive relativism he or she can be considered a victim of or an upholder of Ethnocentrism. Either one is liberal or respectful to other cultures and

their moral and epistemological tradition or is in a state of mind in which he or she prefers his or her own culture for judging the cultures of others.

This style of reasoning is in either/or style. It creates a binary opposition. Either one is liberal or an upholder of Ethnocentrism.

I.C. Jarvie in his article (1983, 103) tries to oppose the argument and presents his own point of view. According to him the opposite of relativism is not absolutism in the strict-sense. We can make a new distinction. According to him we should discriminate strong absolutism from weak absolutism. It is not necessary for a person to adopt Ethnocentrism, necessarily, by rejecting relativism. It is possible (logically and rationally) to reject relativism on its fundamental grounds without adopting the point of view of Absolutism or Ethnocentrism.

Karl R. Popper opposes moral and epistemological relativism: “The proponent of relativism put before us standards of mutual understanding which are unrealistically high. And when we fail to meet those standards, they claim the understanding is impossible” (1976, 52).

Popper suggests that we should expect less from the discussion or interaction of two or more persons having different cultural backgrounds. But when an anthropologist claims that the task of anthropology is to give description and not to give evaluation at all, he is denying the very possibility of mutual interaction and evaluation.

Popper is of the opinion that interaction and discussion between two people having different framework is not impossible though difficult. There are many things which become the cause of this difficulty. Personal biases, mental habits, ego, a specific educational background etc. He is of the opinion that we always should try to transcend from our original positions and try to grasp the concepts or traditions which are alien to us. At one hand he forbids to expect too much from any sort of cultural interaction but on the other he does not seem to consider this effort impossible or useless. Popper opposes cultural and epistemological relativism but he is also against Ethnocentrism. What he actually wants is the universality of knowledge. But if we are only to describe and not to evaluate, how we will achieve the objectivity and universality of knowledge? An impossibility of fruitful cultural interaction emerges in this way.

### **The Phenomenon of Description**

Is it possible for any person to describe anything without giving any sort of value judgment? Is it humanly possible just to describe and not to evaluate? Actually when any person describes any other person or culture or a phenomenon, consciously or unconsciously he or she is evaluating and giving value judgment. This process is so natural that you do not even notice the presence of it. In the process of description we choose some aspects of a phenomenon leaving behind other aspects considering them insignificant or unimportant. Nobody can describe everything about anything. We have to be choosy in our description of anything. Our picking and choosing about anything in the process of description is not itself a process of judgment? Is there anything called 'Pure description'? It is but natural that when we start describing anything, we naturally start analyzing and judging!

Within description and evaluation there exists the phenomenon of interpretation. To interpret a thing is to see the thing from one's own point of view and from one's own angle. This angle could be cultural as Herskovits told but it could be trans-cultural, also. We can take some examples. Jarvie "the erroneous view that the stars move around the earth was once official doctrine in our culture and it was criticized and overthrown from within" (Jarvie 1995, 37). If we cannot transcend culture than what could be the justification of the development within one culture?

If every statement is language or culture specific and we cannot transcend our culture then the very statement of relativists also cannot be considered universal. This statement can also be considered locally true and universally false.

Why we are afraid of giving value judgment to other cultures? There could be two major reasons for it. It becomes a fashion in modern Anthropology not to give value judgment to any culture. To be a liberal is to be a cultural relativist! If everything and every statement is culture specific then what could be the cause of any reformation within one culture?

When an anthropologist observes any other culture and notices anything against the basic human rights, what should he do? He should consider it a cultural thing or an offence against humanity?

There are many such things in the culture and tradition of our own country. What should be our behavior towards them? We should

consider them the integral part of our culture or try to eliminate them? According to Popper: "...our western civilization is the result of the clash or confrontation, of different cultures, and therefore of the clash, of confrontation, of different frame works" (1976, 57). Description without evaluation or without any value judgment does not create any problem or clash but without any clash or conflict nothing productive happens in the human world. We should respect the culture of others. We should respect our own cultures but we should not consider cultures as the sole criterion of truth. The logical result of this point of view is the impossibility of knowledge. Since there are many cultures so there are many truths. In short this point of view denies the universality of knowledge at all.

If cultures are the ultimate criterion of truth, then there should be no development within one culture. Any development, any change or progress in a culture signifies its imperfection, its weakness and its incompleteness. A perfect thing needs no change. The ultimate criterion of truth should be perfect and static but in reality, it is not.

On the other hand by giving value judgment about any culture other than of our own, we should be conscious about these things.

Before giving value judgment one should study thoroughly the different cultural background or frame work.

One should be conscious about his own bias, mental conditioning and mental habits. We cannot see things with a naked eye but we can at least try to analyze a thing with different angles.

Jarvie wrote (1995), "If we are not explaining society and its feature using generalizations then of what possible intellectual interest is Anthropology"? In the same article he also wrote "values are used to measure cultures, including the culture that gives birth to them. If values cannot transcend cultures how can cultures engage in self-assessment?" (10)

### **The Epistemological Aspect**

Moral and cultural relativism has its epistemological aspect also. By considering cultures the sole criteria of truth, we consider all knowledge as acquired. Moral and cultural relativists actually follow the Lockean tradition according to which all knowledge is basically acquired in nature. They deny the innate ideas. Empiricists can agree with them but rationalists cannot agree on the point that all knowledge is acquired in nature and human mind is like a blank slate at birth. (Russell

2003) Moral relativism has a strong connection with cultural relativism. According to moral relativism, morality is not innate but acquired. It is the sum total of the dos' and don'ts of early childhood. This point of view denies the universality of morality. Rationalists, usually, deny the claims of moral and cognitive relativism and present their point of view according to which the basic moral and cognitive ideas are in-born and latent. If culture determines everything then there isn't anything called human nature or universal morality or universal learning. It is not easy to consider all human knowledge and morality acquired-acquired through culture or environment. It is not difficult to state that knowledge and morality is innate potentially and culture and environment help realize this potential or vice versa.

### **Frazer and Collingwood**

Avoidance of giving any value judgment to any culture has a historical background behind. If we look to see what Sir James George Frazer says about magic, we will come to know that he considers the primitive people not fully groomed human beings. I.C. Jarvie and Joseph Agassi in their article (1967, 98) "the problem of the rationality of magic" wrote about Frazer "He sees magic, religion and science as three competing systems, one of which is logically defective and one of which is factually defective". R.G. Collingwood opposes the view of Frazer in his book (1938, 65). Collingwood enumerates different kinds of craft also. By the word 'magic' he means to strengthen the emotions and try to use them for some Practical purpose. According to Collingwood (70) the primitive man does know the difference between mental association and the objective world around. Collingwood thinks magic as a tool to strengthen the emotions and then to try to use them in hunting or gathering food etc. The point of view of Collingwood about magic is quite different from Frazer and it seems more sympathetic. The point of view of Jarvie and Agassi is also very sympathetic towards the magical practices of the primitive man. It is thought indecent now-a-days to consider our fore-fathers ignorant and fool. It is also thought brutal to consider the magical practices of primitive people futile and idiotic. Let us understand the Collingwood's point of view about magical practices of cave men in detail. Collingwood disagrees with Frazer and many other anthropologists on the point that cave men did not discriminate deer in outer world from the deer painted on the walls of the caves or the nails and hair of some person with the actual personality of his or her. According to Collingwood the magical practices along with the collective songs, dances and poetry were actually the efforts to strengthen the emotions for practical purposes like hunting or

confronting the enemies. If we look to see the different interpretations of Frazer and Collingwood to the same phenomenon, we can easily notice that mere description does not work. When an anthropologist tries to understand a phenomenon, he or she has to interpret it from his or her own point of view, style of thinking and perspective. Interpretations, along with value judgments, do work and not mere descriptions. This is exactly what Jarvie said and this is exactly what Popper called 'the myth of the framework' (Popper 1976, 96).

### **Conclusion**

Cultural Relativism highlights some important rational and moral aspects in trance cultural discussions but it also leads towards impossibility of knowledge. In these kinds of discussions, we should be very conscious about our judgments and evaluation but it does not mean that we cannot transcend culture or language. If we accept this radical point of view, then there is no possibility of a meaningful discourse between the people of different cultural backgrounds. Jarvie suggests a new distinction- the distinction between strong absolutism and weak absolutism and Popper suggests that we should not expect too much from a cross cultural debate because unrealistic expectations lead to the disappointments which are also uncalled for. Frazer considers the magical practices of the cave men childish or idiotic but according to Collingwood this was a way to strengthen their emotions for practical purposes. Both of the interpretations about the magical practices of ancient people cannot be gotten through mere description but through logical analyses and through the exercise of reason. This is what Jarvie wants to assert and this is what Popper suggests.

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