

Anthropologists and moral relativism

Three factual observations

1. Social influence on individuals: they learn their values through belonging to social groups and live in groups throughout their lives.
2. The diversity of cultures and the tendency to prefer one's own over others, regard its rules and conventions as natural.
3. The disastrous record of European imperialism, misunderstanding other societies and believing in one's own cultural and moral superiority.

Three propositions

1. Individual freedom depends on freedom for cultural groups.

Why? Individual personalities develop through cultures.

2. It is a scientific fact that there is no way of qualitatively evaluating different cultures, i.e. saying whether one is better than the others.

Why? There is no biological basis for cultural differences (anyone could grow up in any culture) and all cultural systems are adequate for the biological survival of their members (they thrive or fail for historical reasons).

3. "Standards and values are relative to the culture from which they derive so that any attempt to formulate postulates that grow out of the beliefs or moral codes of one culture must to that extent detract from the applicability of any Declaration of Human Rights to mankind as a whole."

Why? Because "the eternal verities only seem so because we have been taught to regard them as such" and "every people ... lives in devotion to

verities whose eternal nature is as real to them as are those of Euroamerican culture to Euroamericans.”¹

Three arguments

1. Moral universalism: there are some universal values and that the best way of realizing them is to leave others alone. E.g. the remarks about individual freedom requiring cultural freedom.
2. Political point: the Europeans have been so bad that we should throw up as many barriers against them as possible.
3. Moral relativism: each culture has different moral standards and so each should be left to define the rights of its members as it sees fit.

¹ American Anthropological Association, “Statement on Human Rights,” *American Anthropologist* 49, no. 4, Part 1 (1947): 542.