



Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is a key concept within anthropology. This philosophical notion is widely accepted by anthropologists as it allows for a more respectful approach to cultures around the world.

Cultural relativist ideas encourage us to withhold judgement before coming to any ethical or moral conclusions about a particular cultural belief or action. It recognizes that by originating from a different culture, we will automatically be at least partially biased towards other cultural beliefs and behaviors—for example, they may appear outwardly strange. Instead, cultural relativism encourages us to recognize the inherent value of each culture and understand that different cultures have emerged as responses to different environmental and historical conditions.

Cultural Evolution

Cultural relativism can be seen, in many cases, as a reaction against the idea of cultural evolution. Unilineal cultural evolution—in a classical sense—is an outdated theory that argues that all societies and cultures undergo an evolution—typically, this evolution is from what is termed a barbaric society into a civilized one. However, this concept creates a hierarchy of cultures where European and North American civilization is put at the top, and other cultures are positioned further below.

The concept of cultural evolution is widely disregarded within anthropology and other academic circles since it presents a prejudiced view of the world. This ethnocentric view does not account for cultural diversity or see the value in other cultural beliefs and practices. Today, anthropologists know that not all societies and cultures follow the same path and have the same goals. Cultural relativism is a strong argument against cultural evolution.

Debate

This summary of cultural relativism has been simplistic, and the concept is much more complex than is presented here. For example, there are opponents to the idea of cultural relativism, who argue that cultural relativism is simply another form of ethical relativism—which states that there is no universal morality. Many anthropologists simply believe that we should be cautious to place judgement on different cultural beliefs and behaviors simply because we do not understand them, rather than promoting a world with no ethical values. However, both these concepts are controversial and part of frequent debates.

Links:

[1] <https://explorable.com/>, [2] <https://explorable.com/cultural-relativism>