

# Cultural Relativism 2.0

by Michael F. Brown

Cultural relativism continues to be closely identified with anthropology even though few anthropologists today endorse the comprehensive version of it first articulated by students of Franz Boas. A review of the progressive reduction of the scope of cultural relativism since the early decades of the twentieth century suggests that it should be regarded not as a comprehensive theory or doctrine but as a rule of thumb that when used prudently serves the limited but indispensable function of keeping anthropology attentive to perspectives that challenge received truth.

Anthropology owns the franchise on cultural relativism, yet anthropologists as a group seem to approach the subject with a mixture of ambivalence and ennui. As a comprehensive doctrine, cultural relativism has received surprisingly little attention in anthropology since the early 1990s. Much of the discipline's energy has been focused instead on efforts to reconcile relativism with support for human rights (see, e.g., Cowan, Dembour, and Wilson 2001; Goodale 2006; Merry 2006; Turner and Nagengast 1997; and R. Wilson 1997). Cultural relativism lives on in the undergraduate anthropology curriculum, of course, and those of us who teach introductory courses dutifully tackle it at least once a semester. This gives the subject something of the character of Valentine's Day cards exchanged between spouses: a ritualized expression of commitment more convincingly communicated in other ways. As much as anything, we fear that our students will think us negligent should we fail to discuss it.

Given the equivocal status of cultural relativism among professional anthropologists, it is startling to witness the contention that it continues to provoke beyond our disciplinary palisades. Shortly before he was named Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger denounced moral relativism, to which cultural relativism is often linked, as a major corrupting force in human affairs. In the wake of the 2001 Al-Qaeda attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, the conservative cultural critic William Bennett declared that the spread of cultural relativism represented one of the greatest dangers faced by American society. Relativism, Bennett said, "implies that we have no basis for judging other peoples and cultures, and certainly no basis for declaring some better than others, let alone 'good' or 'evil'" (2002, 46). And without such

distinctions, he says, Americans will be unable to resist terrorism. Bennett's denunciation follows in the footsteps of Dinesh D'Souza, whose book *The End of Racism* (1995) explicitly vilifies Boasian relativism for what its author sees as complicity in the perpetuation of American racial injustice.<sup>1</sup>

Less polemical work in other fields regularly revisits arguments against cultural relativism, often as part of broader reflections on the practical and ethical dimemmas of life in pluralist societies. Countless philosophers and political scientists have pronounced cultural relativism dead on logical or ethical grounds.<sup>2</sup> "Relativism's internal incoherence and its absurd and unpalatable consequences have long been clearly exposed," writes I. C. Jarvie (1993, 546) with characteristic tartness. Nevertheless, cultural relativism staggers on—neither fully endorsed nor completely repudiated—with what to its critics must seem like the affectless persistence of killer zombies in a low-budget horror film.

Nowhere is relativism's stock higher than among undergraduates. I am not alone in having observed a steady shift in student values toward uncritical acceptance of almost any behavior that can be justified in terms of the actor's culture (see, e.g., Cronk 1999, 111). The most common example, which will be familiar to many readers, is a classroom com-

1. After offering a thumbnail sketch of the emergence of cultural relativism from the work of Boas and his students, D'Souza argues that the triumph of relativist thinking in American intellectual and political circles made it impossible to criticize features of African-American culture that D'Souza deems dysfunctional: "An initial openness to the truths of other cultures degenerates into a close-minded denial of all transcultural standards" (1995, 384). Citing the work of Elijah Anderson, D'Souza insists that a ubiquitous ideology of relativism keeps inner-city blacks caught in a conflict between "a hegemonic culture of pathology and a besieged culture of decency" within their own communities (p. 528).

2. For discussion of relativism and pluralism, see Appiah (2006), Howard (1995), Lukes (2003), Moody-Adams (1997), and Rorty (1986). Among those who judge cultural relativism to be intellectually bankrupt or at least gravely flawed I would include Arkes (1986), Aya (1996), Boudon (2004), Cook (1999), Gellner (1985), Jarvie (1984, 1993), Li (2006), and Zechenter (1997).

**Michael F. Brown** is Lambert Professor of Anthropology and Latin American Studies and Director of the Oakley Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences at Williams College (Williamstown, MA 01267, U.S.A. [mbrown@williams.edu]). This paper was submitted 12 I 07 and accepted 18 IX 07.

ment on the order of “I was talking to my roommate about Aztec human sacrifice and he was, like, Who are we to say that it was wrong? It was their culture, right?” Noting similar attitudes in his own classes, Richard Handler (2005, 12) writes:

Just as students are relentless in their anxiety about others' values, they are relentless at reinterpreting anthropological relativism as a rule of consumer choice (the world is made up of sovereign individuals, each of whom has the inalienable right to see the world from his or her point of view, and to act accordingly, without criticizing the views, or purchasing decisions, of others).

In a mordant rumination on the robustness of relativism in societies organized around conspicuous consumption, the English cultural critic Richard Hoggart (1998, 6) observes that relativism offers “perfect soil for their endless and always changing urges.” According to Hoggart, relativism is as much a tool of the political right as of the left—perhaps more so, given the right's belief in the inherent sacredness of markets. It is enough to make one wonder whether the right's obsessive need to attack cultural relativism might be a form of overcompensation for its complicity in relativism's propagation at the level of popular culture.

A striking feature of critics' accounts is the extent to which they base their appraisal of cultural relativism on the anthropology of the 1940s and '50s, in particular the work of Melville J. Herskovits. It may be, as James Fernandez (1990) has argued, that the portrait of Herskovits's relativism conveyed in these books and essays misinterprets many aspects of what he was trying to convey. But that is less significant than the need to ransack the anthropology of a half-century ago to find a version of relativism suitable for analytical demolition. I find it tiresome to be held accountable for versions of relativism to which neither I nor most anthropologists of my acquaintance subscribe. Not only has anthropological theory evolved significantly since the articulation of the mid-twentieth-century version of cultural relativism but the social world itself has been transformed in ways that necessitate a recalibration of relativistic thinking away from the broad scope of earlier formulations. Above all, humanity is more interconnected. The relativist claim that each society represents an autonomous conceptual universe may serve as a useful metaphor, but it bears little resemblance to the everyday experience of most people.

My aim in this essay is to review briefly the history of classical cultural relativism with an eye toward documenting its progressive modification in anthropology since the early decades of the twentieth century. After considering arguments for abandoning cultural relativism altogether, I propose an amended, defensible version that is consistent with contemporary anthropological practice. In a notably fractious discipline, the latter goal may be a bridge too far, but I believe that it merits the effort. This project is directed to two broad audiences: first, to nonanthropologists, many of whom er-

roneously persist in seeing the work of Boasians such as Herskovits as the definitive expression of anthropological relativism prevailing in the profession, and, second, to my fellow anthropologists, whose continuing, if highly selective, allegiance to certain elements of cultural relativism may be undermining anthropology's historic role as the discipline best qualified to shed light on broad, transhistorical patterns in human social life. The latter concern has been voiced eloquently by Maurice Bloch, whose essay “Where Did Anthropology Go? or The Need for ‘Human Nature’” (2005) tracks the steady and, from Bloch's perspective, regrettable withdrawal of anthropologists from forms of comparison and generalization that would allow us to balance the study of particular cultural histories with a vision of human nature in the broadest sense.

## The Ascent and Decline of Classical Cultural Relativism

The story of the rise to prominence of cultural relativism, usually attributed to the work of Franz Boas and his students, has been well told by various scholars (see especially Hatch 1983), and here I will simply review its broad contours. Although Boas's position on cultural relativism was in fact somewhat ambiguous, he laid the groundwork for the full elaboration of cultural relativism by redirecting anthropology away from evolutionary approaches closely linked to nineteenth-century racial theory and by elaborating on Tylor's notion that culture was an integrated system of behaviors, meanings, and psychological dispositions.<sup>3</sup> The flowering of classical cultural relativism awaited the work of Boas's students, including Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Melville Herskovits. Their articulation of a comprehensive relativist doctrine was appealing to intellectuals disillusioned by the pointless brutality of World War I, which undermined faith in the West's cultural superiority and inspired a romantic search for alternatives to materialism and industrialized warfare (Stocking 1992, 162–64).

As formulated by the Boasians, cultural relativism encompasses several axioms. First, each culture is said to constitute a total social world that reproduces itself through enculturation, the process by which values, emotional dispositions, and embodied behaviors are transmitted from one generation to the next.<sup>4</sup> These values and practices are usually perceived by members of a society as uniquely satisfying and superior

3. For discussion of the complexities and ambiguities of Boas's position on relativism, see Stocking (1968, 230–33) and Lewis (1999). Robert Lowie (1956, 1009) recalls that in his classes Boas “unremittingly preached the necessity of seeing the native from within.” “As for moral judgments of aboriginal custom,” Lowie writes, “we soon learnt to regard them as a display of anachronistic naïveté.”

4. Herskovits (1972 [1955], 15) declares: “The principle of cultural relativism, briefly stated, is as follows: *Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation.*”

to all others—hence the universality of ethnocentrism.<sup>5</sup> Because understandings are relative to enculturation, the ethnographer must interpret a culture on the basis of its own internal web of logic rather than through the application of a universal yardstick. This principle applies to everything from language and kinship systems to morality and ontology. Accompanying sensitivity to cultural context is the combination of empathy and detachment that Robert Lowie (1981 [1960], 149) calls “seeing within.” For a professional social scientist, says Lowie, “to bemoan the depravity of cannibals would be nowadays as much of an anachronism as it would be for a textbook in physics to introduce comments upon the benevolence of God into an exposition on gravity.”<sup>6</sup>

Complementing the core principle of cultural coherence is insistence that societies and cultures cannot be ranked on an evolutionary scale. Each must be seen as *sui generis* and offering a satisfying way of life, however repugnant or outlandish particular aspects of it may seem to outsiders. Given the assumed integrity of each culture, anthropologists are obliged to show a tolerance for the traditional practices of other peoples and to encourage similar tolerance among their fellow citizens. “We must recognize that the pluralistic nature of the value systems of the world’s cultures . . . cannot be judged on the basis of any single system,” insists Herskovits (1972 [1958], 109).

Finally, critics have noted that proponents of classical cultural relativism are inclined to contradict their own axioms by subjecting the institutions and social practices of Western industrial societies to criticism deemed unacceptable when assessing non-Western, preindustrial ones. As Lévi-Strauss (1972 [1955], 384) declares, the anthropologist is fated to serve as “critic at home and conformist elsewhere.” The justification for this sensibility is that the technological and economic dominance of the West gives it a vastly greater capacity to impose its own varieties of ethnocentrism on others (Herskovits 1972 [1958], 103).

So far, so familiar. Reviewing the debates of Herskovits’s time, however, I am struck by the extent to which, even then, prominent anthropologists balked at embracing all of these precepts. As Clyde Kluckhohn makes clear in his 1955 essay “Ethical Relativity: *Sic et Non*,” as early as the 1940s Ralph Linton questioned cultural relativism’s denial of ethical universals, arguing instead for the recognition of ethical principles formulated at a high enough level of abstraction to encompass the considerable ethical variability that ethnog-

raphers observe throughout the world (1955, 668–72). Kluckhohn concluded that “neither extreme relativism nor extreme absolutism is tenable as a guiding hypothesis for further empirical enquiry” (pp. 676–77). Even the clinical detachment promoted by Lowie—dismissed perhaps too cynically by Stanley Diamond (1974, 111) as a “bedside manner”—seemed to be on the wane by the late 1950s and early 1960s, pushed aside by memorably affectionate ethnographies by Jules Henry, Colin Turnbull, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, and others.<sup>7</sup>

Thus far this discussion has had a distinctly North American emphasis. Clearly, however, the Boasians crystallized relativistic thinking with deep roots in European social theory.<sup>8</sup> The eighteenth-century thinker Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1802) is known as the author of an important strand of cultural relativism. Elements of Herder’s ideas were refined by Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) and more influentially by Edward Westermarck (1862–1939), who asserted that morality was rooted not in universal principles but in culturally conditioned emotions.<sup>9</sup> British anthropology, which maintained closer ties to academic philosophy than its American counterpart, directed considerable energy to the so-called modes-of-thought issue, rooted in the work of Lévy-Bruhl, Malinowski, and Evans-Pritchard and culminating in the 1970s and 1980s in vigorous debates about the transcultural status of rationality.<sup>10</sup>

There is, however, a characteristically American flavor to classical cultural relativism. First, it built on and complemented the culture concept, whose influence was far greater in North America than elsewhere. Second, the U.S. legacy of slavery and racial segregation and the ongoing challenge of assimilating large numbers of immigrants into a hybrid society gave cultural relativism—and in particular its theme of intercultural tolerance—a political resonance that it lacked in much of Europe until late in the twentieth century.

## Classical Cultural Relativism and Human Rights

A pivotal moment in the trajectory of classical cultural relativism was the American Anthropological Association’s criticism of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (AAA

5. The coining of the term “ethnocentrism” is conventionally attributed to the sociologist William Graham Sumner (1840–1910). For discussion of how ethnocentrism and relativism fit into Sumner’s work, see Shone (2004).

6. Kroeber (1952, 137) invokes a similar analogy when he states, “Reference in this matter is to values as they exist in human societies at given times and places; to values as they make their appearance in the history of our species; in short, to values as natural phenomena occurring in nature—much like the characteristic forms, qualities, and abilities of animals as defined in comparative zoology.”

7. For more detailed discussion of pluralism in American anthropology with respect to Herskovits’s ideas about cultural relativism, see Lewis (1999, 720).

8. As early as the 1830s, Auguste Comte (1976 [1830–42], 89) argued that one of the ways positivist sociology differed from theology and metaphysics was that it had a “tendency to render relative the ideas which were at first absolute.” This transition from the absolute to the relative was for Comte a decisive step in the creation of social science.

9. On Herder, see, for example, Denby (2005); on Bastian, Koepping (1995); on Westermarck’s moral relativism, Stocking (1995, 156).

10. Two much-cited collections that pursue this line of investigation are Wilson (1970) and Hollis and Lukes (1982).

1947).<sup>11</sup> Today critics call the AAA's resistance to the Universal Declaration embarrassing or even shameful. Mark Goodale (2006, 25) states that the impact of the discipline's response to the Universal Declaration was that anthropology became "synonymous with cultural relativism, and cultural relativism became synonymous with the categorical rejection of universal human rights." Nevertheless, Goodale and other careful observers note that some concerns expressed by the Universal Declaration's opponents in anthropology were legitimate and needed to be aired publicly. The most significant was the document's privileging of individual rights over those of groups ("cultures"). Whether the AAA's response to the Universal Declaration was tactically sound is a question I leave to historians, but it can reasonably be seen as having contributed to the gradual shift in human-rights discourse from domination by Western legal experts to broad-based discussion that includes thinkers from developing countries in general and indigenous peoples in particular (Merry 2001, 34–39).

The standing of cultural relativism in public debates about human rights was further eroded when human-rights violators themselves began to appropriate its logic to defend their questionable policies and practices (Messer 1993, 240–41). Glendon (2001, 222) notes that during deliberations related to the adoption of the Universal Declaration, "Saudi Arabia made the isolated claim that freedom to marry and to change one's religion were Western ideas ill suited for universal application," a position that garnered little support at the time. More recent appeals to the notion of "Asian values" have been equally unsuccessful in slowing the shift toward universalized views of human rights. The attenuation of classical cultural relativism and its replacement by a more modulated strain makes this rhetorical gambit harder to sustain.

Today anthropologists are significant actors in global human-rights debates, whether they contribute as ethnographers, policy makers, or political activists. When reviewing factors that contributed to the discipline's move from wary mistrust to active endorsement of global human rights, it would be hard to overstate the impact of feminist scholarship. One has only to revisit Gayle Rubin's essay "The Traffic in Women" (1975) to be reminded how decisively early practitioners of feminist anthropology blew apart the normative vision of culture that prevailed in the work of Herskovits, Kroeber, Benedict, and other Boasians. Rather than being seen as morally homogeneous wholes, societies (even small-scale "tribal" ones) were reimagined as sites of contestation in which men and women often found themselves locked in conflicts over gendered interests and gender-based inequality. This, in turn, led to increased sensitivity to the rights of minorities within larger social units.

The rapid globalization of the women's movement has prompted debates that echo earlier discussions about whether

the concept of human rights is inherently ethnocentric. Should the rights of women be cast in individualistic terms such as a right to formal education, a right to choose marital partners, a right to protection from domestic violence, and the like, or are there group-based cultural rights that benefit women particularly and therefore warrant equal attention? Such questions continue to be debated vigorously today.<sup>12</sup> In these discussions anthropology has had a dual role that reflects the legacy of the 1940s debate over the Universal Declaration. On one hand, anthropologists are well represented among those calling attention to the suffering experienced by women as a result of patriarchal customs as well as the destructive impact of neocolonialist policies. On the other, anthropologists stand ready to question simplistic moralizing that invokes the rhetoric of universal human rights. The latter kind of intervention is exemplified by Lila Abu-Lughod's cautionary essay on Muslim women (2002), which challenges ill-considered assumptions about the oppressed status of women in the Muslim world. Abu-Lughod asks her readers to be "respectful of other paths toward social change that might give women better lives" (p. 788), paths that may have Islamic variations difficult for non-Muslims to envision. A more controversial example is Richard Shweder's (2003) critique of the global movement against female genital mutilation. Emulating the double-negative logic of Geertz's (2000) "anti anti-relativism," Shweder does not defend female circumcision; he simply argues against an "imperial liberalism" that campaigns against it by marshaling questionable facts and excluding the voices of those who hold different views.<sup>13</sup> Even those unconvinced by Shweder's argument must acknowledge that his call for open dialogue and scrupulous attention to evidence should be taken seriously, especially when seen against a backdrop of the West's previous efforts to impose its moral vision—too often colored by economic and political self-interest—in Africa and elsewhere.

Where human rights are concerned, then, anthropology has moved a great distance from the positions it enunciated in the late 1940s. As an occupational community, anthropologists have taken a strong stand in support of global efforts to protect basic rights on both the individual and the communal level. What remains is a downsized relativism that constrains the facile invocation of human rights to justify external intervention (Dembour 2001) and, more broadly, helps to counterbalance the civilization-versus-barbarism rhetoric that has been granted a new lease on life by recent terrorist attacks in North America and Europe.

Many have noted that support for human rights and humanitarian interventions is difficult to square with the broad tolerance advocated by proponents of classical cultural relativism. Alison Dundes Renteln (1988) argues that tolerance

11. Many recent works consider the debate within anthropology about the Declaration of Human Rights, including Messer (1993), Engle (2001), and Glendon (2001).

12. For an informative discussion of this issue, with particular attention to the status of women and minorities, see Nagengast (1997).

13. For recent essays arguing against claims of moral (or liberal) imperialism, see Stoll (2006) and R. Wilson (2006).

has no necessary connection to relativism, even if the two are closely linked in the work of Herskovits and others. A recent critique of liberal tolerance by the political theorist Wendy Brown (2006, 7) goes beyond this to identify what she sees as the pernicious implications of tolerance talk, which among other things may serve “not only to anoint Western superiority but also to legitimate Western cultural and political imperialism.”<sup>14</sup>

A full consideration of tolerance and its political implications is beyond the scope of my analysis. It should be clear, however, that tolerance is easier to advocate when the stakes are low than when cultural differences seriously threaten powerful interests, a point made long ago by Diamond (1974, 109) when he remarked that the relativism of the 1970s was “in accord with the spirit of the time, a perspective congenial in an imperial civilization convinced of its power.” Today our no less imperial civilization seems uncertain about the degree of difference that can be accommodated within its own borders or in the global markets central to its continued prosperity. This insecurity guarantees that the scope and limits of tolerance will remain a vexing issue.

## Unpacking Cultural Relativism’s Component Parts

Relativistic thinking has a viral tendency to spread beyond its zone of legitimate usefulness. In the face of mounting evidence that the implacable logic of relativism was deployed too liberally by the Boasians, many scholars have tried to distinguish among cultural relativism’s component parts with the goal of demonstrating that some have more merit than others.<sup>15</sup> The number of subvarieties of relativism that have been posited in these analyses is dizzying. One philosophical work lists 20 kinds of relativism in its index, including conceptual relativism, historical relativism, objective relativism, ontological relativism, relativistic metaethics, and vulgar relativism (Meiland and Krausz 1982, 259). In general, however, the most important elements of classical cultural relativism fall into three broad categories: methodological relativism, cognitive or epistemological relativism, and ethical or moral relativism.

Few philosophers and even fewer social scientists object to methodological (“descriptive”) relativism, the practice of suspending judgment until a belief or practice can be understood within its total context. The most resolute antirelativists, however, insist that methodological relativism is not relativism at all: for Jarvie (1993, 540) it is “contextualism,” whereas Tilley (2000, 520–21) prefers to call it “situationism.” Ironically, supporters of methodological relativism rarely note that it is the expression of relativism infused with the greatest profes-

sional self-interest. Fieldwork would be impossible to accomplish if anthropologists felt free to voice dismay whenever confronted by practices that struck them as illogical or repugnant. As outsiders and guests, we suspend overt judgment out of respect for our hosts and, it must be said, to be allowed to complete our research. Regardless of its ethical complexities, methodological relativism is likely to remain an uncontested feature of anthropological practice, just as variations on it have been incorporated into professions such as psychology, medicine, and law.

Cognitive relativism holds that members of different societies live in different and incommensurable knowledge worlds. Encompassed by this general principle are two interrelated subthemes, one claiming that societies may exhibit ways of thinking that are radically different from our own, the other challenging the assumption that positivism and the scientific method have transcultural validity. Both have taken a beating on empirical grounds over the past three decades. The work of cognitive scientists has shown that many features of human cognition are universal, presumably because they are based on a shared neural architecture even though the expression of that architecture is significantly inflected by cultural forces. In one of his several critiques of relativism, Ernest Gellner (1985, 86; see also Spiro 1986, 265–69) observes that “no anthropologist, to my knowledge, has come back from a field trip with the following report: *their* concepts are *so* alien that it is impossible to describe their land tenure, their kinship system, their ritual.” Elsewhere Gellner (1992, 58–60) argues that the relentless spread of science and technology throughout the world is the strongest evidence of positivism’s transcultural validity. Key elements of science may have arisen in the West, but its logic is available to members of all societies and is generally recognized by them as superior (materially, if not morally) when they become fully conversant with it.

From a more distanced vantage, the persistence of cognitive relativism in the face of so much contrary evidence illustrates a figure/ground dilemma characteristic of the relativism debate. It is conventionally held that perfect translation from one culture to another is impossible or at least so compromised by issues of relative power that we should regard it with skepticism.<sup>16</sup> Yet, as Gellner observes, by dint of hard work we can approximate such perfection or at least come close enough to achieve a high level of mutual understanding. One would expect that on an increasingly interconnected planet claims of radical cultural difference would be ever harder to sustain. But there is little evidence that such claims are declining in frequency, and some scholars hold that “radical worlds” (Povinelli 2001, 320) continue to proliferate de-

14. Coming from a different theoretical milieu from Wendy Brown’s, MacIntyre (2000, 153) insists that “[tolerance] is not in itself a virtue and too inclusive a toleration is a vice.”

15. Representative discussions of major categories of relativism can be found in Hatch (1983) and Spiro (1986).

16. Clifford and Marcus’s *Writing Culture* (1986) is arguably the most influential meditation on the political dilemmas of intercultural translation. Of particular relevance is a chapter by Talal Asad (1986, 164) that dissects Gellner’s optimistic claims of translatability and concludes that “the anthropological enterprise of cultural translation may be vitiated by the fact that there are asymmetrical tendencies and pressures in the languages of dominated and dominant societies.”

spite the myriad forces pushing humanity toward greater cultural similarity. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that this is primarily a political rather than an ontological process—and a thoroughly modern one at that. Purveyors of strategic otherness are resisting the efforts of outsiders to translate their values and sentiments, an act of commensuration inseparable from power relations (Harrison 2003). In this context, radical alterity is a rhetorical tactic that says, in effect, “We are ultimately unknowable, at least by you”—the rejoinder to which is “If you are so impossible to understand, why should we talk at all?” It is hard to see how strong claims of cognitive incommensurability can be justified in the face of evidence that countless human beings cross formidable cultural barriers on a daily basis.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, to deny the absoluteness of differences between groups is not to declare that we are all the same. Radical sameness is just as implausible as radical difference. With refreshing common sense, the philosopher Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (1989, 418) observes that when relativists and anti-relativists debate, they tend to traffic in exaggerations, “with relativists denying the possibility of cross-cultural understanding and their opponents denying the possibility of systematic untranslatability.” Under these circumstances, she notes, their views are at the same time irreconcilable and “wildly implausible.” The challenge of the anthropologist is to cultivate a suppleness of mind that facilitates navigation through the ample terrain lying between these two equally untenable extremes.

If cognitive relativism pits one anthropologist against another, moral or ethical relativism—the insistence that each people’s values are *sui generis* and self-validating, requiring that outsiders assess them by that group’s own standard rather than by a universal one—would seem to pit anthropologists against everyone else. It would be a herculean task to inventory the books and essays in which an author glibly claims that anthropologists will defend any practice because it has been deemed customary by some community or subculture. It proves surprisingly hard to find one of these anthropologists, however. Instead, sentiment in the discipline seems closer to that expressed in Richard Shweder’s pithy maxim “What is moral is not anything, but it is more than one thing” (1990, 217).

Arrayed against ethical relativism is a range of alternative positions. One is unapologetically absolutist and anti-Enlightenment (“Universal moral rules come from God and are laid down in Holy Book X”). As such, it may be the subject of anthropological research but not a logic with which anthro-

poloogy can engage directly.<sup>18</sup> A more sophisticated universalist position insists that the psychic unity of mankind implies a shared morality, a set of natural-law principles found everywhere, although they may be unevenly applied and imperfectly understood in specific societies. The moral principles offered by universalists tend to be sufficiently abstract that they flirt with triviality, as in “Societies everywhere hold that human life is sacred and cannot be taken without justification.”<sup>19</sup> A statement such as this is not exactly wrong, but it is not particularly useful either, given the range of circumstances that qualify as justification in diverse cultural settings. A context-sensitive application of natural law would require heroic feats of casuistry to encompass the varied circumstances of humankind. The result, I suspect, would begin to look a lot like—relativism.

Lest the latter comment be dismissed as too flippant, let me offer an example: People in many societies believe that sorcery is a real phenomenon and that sorcerers blamed for the deaths of their alleged victims are murderers, plain and simple. If we attempt to apply the natural-law principle “It is immoral to take an innocent human life” to such cases, we face a maze of contingent moral complexities. Prior to the imposition of state power in remote regions, communities had no police force or judiciary that could permit an alleged sorcery murder to be adjudicated and some alternative to capital punishment imposed. Families were left to their own devices, with no monopoly on the use of force. The presence of an active sorcerer in the community was perceived by some as an ongoing threat, since the sorcerer could easily kill again. Not only were family members of a sorcery victim under powerful moral pressure to settle accounts with the alleged killer but also they felt obliged to protect their surviving kin from new magical assaults. Under such circumstances, a reluctance to act was regarded as a moral failure as unforgivable as the negligence of, say, American parents who allow their children regular contact with a known pedophile.

To the best of my knowledge, few anthropologists accept the literal truth of magical assault. Whatever truth inheres in sorcery beliefs lies at another level—the social and political,

18. Fundamentalists consistently reject cultural relativism for its allegedly nihilistic assumptions, calling to mind the declaration of Terry Eagleton (2003, 214) that “fundamentalism is fearful of nihilism, having failed to notice that nihilism is simply the mirror-image of its own absolutism.”

19. The latter approach can be sampled in a work by the political scientist Hadley Arkes in a chapter entitled “The Fallacies of Cultural Relativism; or, Abbott and Costello Meet the Anthropologist.” Arkes declares: “The truth . . . is that in all these societies, distant as they have been in time and space, there has ever been but *one* set of moral premises, *one* understanding of the logic of morals.” He continues (pp. 154–55): “If these societies have not been in agreement, I have suggested that the causes are to be found in matters far less portentous than a difference in moral premises. The disagreements can be attributed, without pretension, to faulty or incomplete reasoning from right premises, or to an insufficiently cultivated sense of the canons and requirements of moral reasoning.”

17. Henrietta Moore (2005, 54) puts the question more tactfully when she asks, “If truths are actually incommensurable then what is the purpose of cross-cultural understanding and comparison?” Likewise, Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006, 31) asks, “And without a shared world, what is there to discuss?”

perhaps—or in views about the covert powers of this or that category of people.<sup>20</sup> Killings based on a fundamentally erroneous belief are regarded as a human tragedy of major proportions. On those grounds, I expect that few anthropologists would protest if governments vigorously suppressed sorcery accusations and killings provided that such intervention were undertaken evenhandedly and with sensitivity to local conditions—admittedly, a tall order.

A fair-minded proponent of natural-law morality would be obliged to note that, as disturbing as sorcery killings may be, they are driven primarily by a mistaken understanding of the world rather than by unvarnished moral depravity. Once one accepts the reality of sorcery, the execution of sorcerers can be justified by reference to such natural-law axioms as the right of self-defense, loyalty to kin, and the obligation to defend one's dependents. Moreover, in the absence of any overarching authority structure that can restore order and weigh competing claims, sorcery-related violence is notoriously difficult to control once unleashed. Unless the version of natural law being applied is one that opposes killing under all circumstances, including self-defense, it is hard to see how our advocate of natural law would find sorcery killing morally equivalent to garden-variety homicide in the industrial West. It is murder, it is deplorable, and it should be discouraged whenever possible, but its distinct moral valence is defined by a particular cultural context that has to be reckoned with. That brings the natural-law account reasonably close to the variety of ethical relativism that prevails in anthropology today.

So far I have emphasized the case against ethical universals. Yet if anthropologists support the idea of universal human rights, we must subscribe to *some* principles close to this level of generality—ideas, say, about fundamental fairness, equality, compassion, and shared responsibility. As Todorov (2000, 138) points out, if humanity did not share basic ethical concepts, we would be incapable of recognizing the moral content of religious teachings from other places and times. The scarcity of anthropological attempts to formulate these principles in an explicit way says a great deal about the paralyzing effect of classical cultural relativism long after it has ceased to be a coherent doctrine or theory.<sup>21</sup> An exception to such timidity is the final chapter of Elvin Hatch's history of anthropological relativism. After concluding that classical cultural relativism is no longer defensible, Hatch (1983, 133–44) offers a set of standards by which the morality of other cultures can be judged. The most important of these is the "humanistic principle," based on the idea that successful institutions promote

human well-being as measured by such indices as fairness toward others, the absence of physical coercion, and so forth. Hatch clearly seeks a functional model of morality rather than one based on natural law, his hope being that this will produce reasonably objective metrics that can be applied cross-culturally.

Hatch draws the line at attempting to make summary judgments about whether one society is more successful than another with respect to the promotion of human well-being: "The ledger sheets on which we tote up the pluses and minuses for each culture are so complex that summary calculations of overall moral standing are nearly meaningless" (1983, 139). To return to our sorcery example, we might be tempted to bask in our moral superiority as members of a society in which reason has largely triumphed over belief in witchcraft. And yet, as Michel de Montaigne (2004) famously observed four centuries ago in "Of Cannibals," "We may then call these people barbarous, in respect to the rules of reason: but not in respect to ourselves, who in all sorts of barbarity exceed them." Our own barbarity manifests itself in extremes of inequality and social alienation that continue to shock members of many indigenous societies.

Robert Edgerton (1992) reframes the project of distinguishing better from worse societies by attempting to identify exemplars of "sick societies." His goal is to debunk classical cultural relativism's claim that all societies are equally successful and, more specifically, the common belief that tribal peoples are happier and healthier than their counterparts in industrial societies. While Edgerton has no problem identifying instances in which cultures have gone awry, he shares Hatch's reluctance to rank societies with respect to well-being or adaptive success. Instead, he argues for additional research on shared human "needs and predispositions" that can be used to "distinguish what is harmful for human beings from what is beneficial to them" (p. 208).

If strong versions of ethical relativism are untenable or at least highly questionable and natural-law principles of morality have only limited utility, with what are we left? One promising approach, which reflects global changes since the time of Herskovits, might be called *dialogical morality*. This approach rejects the cultures-as-discrete-worlds model of classical relativism in favor of one that envisions societies as part of an expansive moral community. "We have become moral contemporaries, caught in a net of interdependence," writes the philosopher Seyla Benhabib (1995, 250), "and our contemporaneous actions will also have tremendous untemporaneous consequences." This circumstance creates what she labels a "community of interdependence," which in turn obliges us "to translate the community of interdependence into a community of conversation across cultures." Benhabib's position invokes both Kant and Rawls but avoids the temptation to impose first-principles morality by fiat, arguing instead that robust regimes of fairness can emerge only after a democratic dialogue that invests them with legitimacy. An emphasis on interdependence highlights the complex moral

20. The question of where the truths of sorcery should be seen to lie is far knottier than I can deal with here. For a subtle, epistemologically nuanced attempt to do justice to these questions, see West (2007). The ethical dilemmas faced by ethnographers when confronted by socially destructive witchcraft accusations are vividly depicted in Wesch (2007).

21. A much-cited example of a highly formalized attempt to define such concepts as fairness, equality, social responsibility, and the contours of a well-ordered society is Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971).

links between apparently distant places. Such links include but are by no means limited to the distorting effect that colonial relations have had on the values and practices of subordinate communities.

The dialogical approach admittedly raises difficult questions. Imagining morality as a yet-to-be-defined set of principles emerging from global consensus leaves a great deal unsettled—too much, perhaps. Globalization (and the technological progress with which it is intertwined) may offer new opportunities for the forging of moral links between communities, but it also generates new ethical challenges as fast as older ones can be dealt with. The injustices associated with the global traffic in human organs suitable for transplantation come immediately to mind, but it is easy to think of others. More insidious is the tendency for the scale and complexity of modern institutions to hide ethically flawed policies from public view. On balance, however, it strikes me as a potentially productive avenue for rethinking transcultural morality after so many of cultural relativism's axioms have proven unsustainable. Dialogical morality is consistent with the "relationalism" identified by Mark Taylor (2007), a scholar of religion, as a key element in an emerging, globally networked moral order that duels with absolutes rooted in exhausted dichotomies: God and Satan, right and wrong, individual and group, cooperation and competition. Taylor is convinced that absolutes must be replaced by "creative co-dependence" and fluid decision making that embrace the relatedness of everything and promote an "ethic of life."

Dialogical morality makes little sense without an underlying conviction that humanity as a whole is moving toward greater equality, compassion, and justice (Ignatieff 2001, 3–5). Anthropologists have long wrestled with the question of whether moral progress is evident in cultural evolution (see, e.g., Hatch 1983, 106–26), and it is fair to say that we remain more skeptical than other occupational groups about the moral virtues of life in large-scale, hierarchically organized societies. That said, the involvement of so many anthropologists in human-rights work suggests an implicit belief that moral progress is a possibility worth striving for.

A commonly noted logical contradiction inherent in both cognitive and ethical relativism can be framed as a question: If members of all societies are ethnocentric by definition, isn't cultural relativism itself just another form of ethnocentrism? Should we care that relativism is a sensibility more often associated with "rootless cosmopolitanism" (Denby 2005, 62) than with the place-based communities whose cultures it claims to defend?

Such questions underscore one of classical cultural relativism's persistent ironies—that it validates the integrity of particular cultures while establishing, however tacitly, the superiority of the relativist's universalizing mission. The implications of this discursive legerdemain have engaged post-structuralist scholarship for decades in a debate that generates

more heat than light.<sup>22</sup> But perhaps it is a less egregious contradiction than it appears. The claim that cultural relativism is a *scientific* doctrine has receded into anthropology's past, and with it some of the concept's presumed institutional legitimacy.<sup>23</sup> Today, in fact, it is more likely to be portrayed as antiscientific. Equally doubtful is the notion that cultural relativism is a unique product of Western intellectual history. Its canonization by the Boasians may have broken new ground, but some facets of cultural relativism date back to Herodotus, and it is not hard to find expressions of folk relativity in ethnographic accounts from Asia, Africa, South America—nearly anywhere, in fact, that different societies have rubbed elbows amicably for long stretches of time. One could probably make a case that ideas about the relativity of cultures are almost as widely distributed as ethnocentrism, although on balance they tend to be more muted and deployed less consistently.

## Nature, Culture, and Universals

Edgerton's call for attention to human universals, alluded to earlier, leads to another major complaint about cultural relativism: that by explaining human thought and behavior exclusively with reference to particular cultures it has marginalized the study of human nature in the broadest sense. This theme is developed at length by Donald E. Brown (1991), whose brief for universals advances several points. First, although classical cultural relativism asserts the inherent plasticity of human values and practices, comparative research has shown that this plasticity has definite limits. An understanding of these limits helps to frame research on cultural difference. Second, recognition of panhuman tendencies or predispositions clarifies situations in which such behavioral default settings are reshaped by culture. Brown, along with others who advocate the study of human nature, insists that efforts to understand and improve human institutions will never succeed until they reckon with innate drives or psychological forces that influence behavior. The problem, of course, is that because cultural relativism is primarily directed to *differences*, it tends to undervalue universals, which are treated as constants and therefore of limited utility in the interpretation of behavior in specific settings.

The search for these innate drives or shared behavioral dispositions seems to have been largely abandoned by anthropologists, leaving the field open to scholars from other disciplines. Their work has produced a wave of books—many

22. For discussion, see Webster (1995) and, in a more general way, the observations of Latour (2004) on the excesses of contemporary critical theory. Strang (2006) argues that the distinction between indigenous and anthropological knowledges has been exaggerated. Anthropologists and their subjects, she argues, have long been engaged in a dialogical process that in her view is heading toward a common synthesis.

23. The obvious exception to this statement is methodological relativism, which continues to hold sway in anthropology and other social sciences.



with the words “morality,” “brain,” and “evolution” in their titles—declaring that cultural relativism has been rendered obsolete by research in cognitive science, sociobiology, or evolutionary psychology claiming to demonstrate that moral thinking is a hard-wired legacy of our primate heritage. This makes it a natural rather than a cultural aspect of human behavior, explainable in terms of its survival value (see, e.g., Hauser 2006 and Joyce 2006).

The notion that morality is in our genes and activated by specific parts of our brain—thus qualifying as a “universal moral grammar” (Hauser 2006, xvii) or as “a gadget, like stereo vision or intuitions about number” (Pinker 2002, 270)—excites book reviewers, who can be relied upon to hail it as revolutionary. However exalted these claims, though, they prove to be of limited utility when trying to make sense of everyday moral practice in a given milieu. If we all have the same moral or ethical substrate, why do values differ so much between human groups? Must we conclude that some moral principles are genuine because they are encoded in our genes, while others are spurious because they have arisen within specific cultural systems?

I do not doubt that evolutionary psychology attracts its share of sober-minded scholars committed to substantiating their theories with evidence that meets accepted scientific standards. Nevertheless, the field seems afflicted, as was sociobiology before it, by a swaggering triumphalism designed as much to provoke as to illuminate. Anthropologists have responded to this challenge in many venues, offering withering critiques of evolutionary psychology that focus on its limited and highly selective use of evidence, its sanctification of psychological mechanisms whose existence is inferred but unproven, and the troubling correspondence between its universalizing theories and the principles underlying modern capitalism.<sup>24</sup> These are typically framed by declarations that anthropology does not, in principle, reject empirically grounded attempts to generalize about human social behavior. Yet there is something disingenuous about this claim given our field’s intensifying commitment to particularism and its retreat from comparison (Yengoyan 2006). We have, as Maurice Bloch (2005) observes, largely abandoned the territory now claimed by evolutionary psychology and are therefore ill-equipped to offer anything more substantive than critique. This is unfortunate, because nuanced, nonreductionist evolutionary approaches (see, e.g., Bloch and Sperber 2002; Richerson and Boyd 2005) ask important questions that warrant wider attention in our discipline and beyond.

To offer a convincing vision of the human condition, we must be able to strike a judicious balance between elements common to most cultural systems and those that make each

group distinctive.<sup>25</sup> Anthropology’s reluctance to do this contributes to the much-lamented disappearance of anthropologists from among the ranks of public intellectuals. Consistent with our long-standing role as “merchants of astonishment,” (Geertz 2000, 64), we can be relied upon to defend the identity claims of particular communities or subcultures. Yet when asked to articulate a vision of how multiple distinct identities and value systems can be knit together into a viable national society, we are typically reduced to trafficking in bland platitudes about the virtues of tolerance. Debate about the range of behavioral diversity that can be accommodated within a liberal state has largely been ceded to political scientists and legal scholars, just as we have left discussion about human nature to evolutionary psychologists. If anthropologists wish to contribute effectively to public debates on these issues, we will have to recover from our disciplinary ancestors a double vision that attends simultaneously to the values of specific societies and those of the large-scale political and moral communities in which they are embedded.

## Conclusions: Relativism within Reason

Classical cultural relativism, an all-encompassing doctrine that embraces methodological, cognitive, and ethical components, has been debated by scholars for more than a half-century. Today’s consensus is that, as originally conceived, cultural relativism has significant flaws. It tends to exaggerate the internal coherence of individual cultures. It overstates differences between societies and underestimates the possibility of transcending these differences. Its totalizing quality invites moral minimalism and fosters hostility to comparative analysis. The logic of relativism is so inherently powerful that when used indiscriminately it can subvert almost any argument.

If these shortcomings were all that cultural relativism had to offer, I would argue for its immediate abandonment. Yet there is much to be said for the clarity and conciseness of classical cultural relativism’s claim that cultures constitute distinct life-worlds, as long as it is not taken too literally. Innumerable ethnographers report decisive moments in their fieldwork when they suddenly encounter beliefs and behaviors lying beyond the pale of immediate comprehension. These might be expressed in the avidity with which one’s hosts consume a local delicacy that by the visitor’s standard is repulsive beyond measure, in lives tragically undone by violation of taboos or rules of decorum that to an outsider appear trivial, or in the dawning recognition that the people among whom one is living experience the landscape around them in

24. A recent example is McKinnon and Silverman (2005), which offers more than a dozen essays that challenge various universalizing claims—largely coming from evolutionary psychology—that the authors deem reductionist. See also McKinnon (2005).

25. Herskovits (1972 [1958], 57) acknowledged the legitimacy of empirically grounded work on human nature. “As far as I know,” he wrote, “there is no relativist who would exclude from the anthropological repertory the study of values, or who would deny to human behavior its common psychological base. Nor do relativists deny the importance of research which would refine our knowledge of the nature and functioning of this common base . . . .”

ways that defy conventional description. It is this, the shock of the truly different, that classical cultural relativism helps us to understand, if not always to encompass within our own view of logic or morality.

In keeping with my revisionist approach, I wish to offer an amended statement of cultural relativism—Version 2.0—that retains defensible elements of the classical formulation while correcting those assumptions that have long since been abandoned by most practicing anthropologists. This is presented in the hope that, if we are to be denounced by relativism's critics, it will be for the relativism to which we subscribe, not the obsolete relativism of anthropology's adolescence.

#### CULTURAL RELATIVISM 2.0

1. Enculturation fosters the conviction among members of a society that their values and practices are uniquely satisfying and superior to others. Anthropologists have concluded that this widespread tendency, conventionally labeled ethnocentrism, is difficult but by no means impossible to transcend. Indeed, in the twenty-first century it is reasonable to assume that much of humankind is enmeshed in at least two overlapping cultural systems simultaneously.

2. Cultural systems are morally charged fields of action and meaning that demonstrate considerable coherence even if they are never truly closed systems. Because of this, institutions and practices must be understood first within their own context. This principle does not militate against the judicious use of cross-cultural comparison if it advances understanding of the broader human condition.

3. The ethnographic record demonstrates that the vast majority of stable societies, no matter how isolated or challenged by environmental constraints, have been able to provide rewarding lives for their members, lives that permit the expression of all human emotions, allow for some level of personal freedom and self-expression, and offer individuals satisfying social roles. This general observation does not preclude the assessment of particular practices as dysfunctional with regard to their ability to promote human well-being. Experience has shown, however, that such assessments should be entertained with caution.

4. All societies demonstrate internal diversity with respect to behavior and ideology; conversely, no society lacks some degree of internal tension along such fault-lines as gender, social rank, sexual orientation, or religious persuasion. Ethnographers should be reluctant to accept at face value any claim that long-established customs are an uncontested part of the society in question or that dominant practices transparently express cultural norms.

5. Interactions *between* cultural systems have complex, far-reaching effects, especially when relations are characterized by significant inequalities of power. A key element of the contextual sensitivity central to cultural relativism is systematic attention to the ways in which intercultural contacts challenge or distort a society's internal dynamics.

6. Although human social and psychological dispositions

are exceedingly plastic, they are not infinitely so. There may therefore be legitimate reasons to study broadly distributed, perhaps even universal aspects of human cognition, family life, sexual expression, ethical values, or ideological production. As has often been observed by scholars committed to comparative work, universals are of limited use in accounting for cultural differences. Nevertheless, a willingness to keep universals in mind is not, in principle, inconsistent with the tenets of cultural relativism.

Despite its flaws, and revised along the lines proposed here, cultural relativism is a set of ideas worth keeping—not as a comprehensive philosophy or doctrine, a status it cannot sustain, but as a rule of thumb or an intellectual tool. The limits of its usefulness, like those of other tools, are determined by the problem at hand and the skill of the person who wields it. But what are those limits? I cannot offer easy answers, only an appeal to judgment and a willingness to submit questions to close scrutiny and the weight of evidence. This leaves substantial gray areas about which anthropologists will continue to argue, as we should.<sup>26</sup>

Above all, we must remember cultural relativism's important historical role in encouraging cross-cultural understanding and contributing to an expansion of human freedom, which of course is what Herskovits and other Boasians intended when they articulated it. Relativist thinking has produced concrete benefits for indigenous peoples, who have used it effectively to broaden the range of evidence that courts are willing to accept in cases involving land claims and the free exercise of religion (Cove 1999, 113). More broadly still, the simplicity of cultural relativism's axioms acts as a useful brake on analytical complacency. Alasdair MacIntyre (1985, 17–20), no friend of the relativist claim that social worlds are incommensurable, finds himself grudgingly accepting relativism's role as a check on conclusions that otherwise seem self-evident. Rationality, he insists, must stand ready to “accept, and indeed to welcome, a possible future defeat” of existing theories by “some alien and perhaps even as yet largely unintelligible tradition of thought and practice.”

The flaws of cultural relativism are redeemed by a productive paradox: By forcing us to act as if the human social world were divided into discrete islands, cultural relativism disciplines the imagination, prompting us to observe carefully while avoiding the temptation to take much for granted. In so doing, it lays the foundation for bridges between these islands and, eventually, to a recognition that they are not islands after all.

26. A recent example is the lively debate provoked by Daniel L. Everett's (2005) assertion that the language of the Pirahã people of Brazil lacks certain grammatical features that many linguists believe common to all human languages.

## Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge the support of Williams College and especially of the Oakley Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences, where I was a fellow when this article was first drafted. Helpful criticism of an earlier version of this article was provided by James W. Fernandez, Peter Just, Kai N. Lee, Benjamin S. Orlove, Bernard J. Rhie, and Arafaat A. Valiani, as well as seven anonymous reviewers. They are not to blame if in some cases I have failed to heed their good advice. The article is dedicated to the philosopher William E. Kennick, who although skeptical of relativism has always proved willing to debate ideas with his appreciative son-in-law.

---

## Comments

### Regna Darnell

Department of Anthropology, University of Western Ontario, London, ON, Canada N6A 5CZ (rdarnell@uwo.ca). 5 I 08

I am in full agreement with Brown that anthropologists have permitted one of their core concepts to be highjacked on the one hand by cultural studies, with its nihilistic version of relativism, and on the other by the political right, with its insistence on blaming the victims of systemic discrimination. We differ somewhat, however, in our proposed solutions. As a historian of anthropology, my initial instinct is to resuscitate the anthropological concept developed during the interwar years and to counter its misreading in more recent and less historically sophisticated times. Moreover, many of the revisions proposed by Brown seem to me to have been implicit in the original formulation.

Franz Boas's distinction between psychology as "the native point of view" and history as cultural development, migration, and intermingling leaves ample space for values—in fact, these are the essence of what differentiates one culture from another. Ruth Benedict's comparative project "beyond relativism" was never completed but took for granted ethnographic evidence for human values across cultures. Paul Radin's universal human philosopher presupposed a universal cognitive template of function if not of surface form. Edward Sapir's "genuine culture" attacked the spuriousness of his own post-World War I culture. Margaret Mead used the lessons of Samoa and elsewhere to harangue fellow Americans about the discontents and dysfunctions of their own society. Relativism, in this context, was far from naïve. Clifford Geertz, a generation later but within a continuous paradigmatic framework, insisted that, whatever the difficulties of the relativist position, anthropologists and citizens alike must oppose relativism's absence. Relativism provided a standpoint from which dialogues could be framed with others. It took for granted that underneath the exotic other lay a familiar albeit

superficially different fellow being. It valued curiosity about the nature of that difference.

The anthropology of my own professional training was deeply Boasian. Although I certainly do not want to return to the classical formulations in simplistic form, I do think that contemporary theory and practice have built well on these foundations. The definition of anthropology in my initial undergraduate course was "the study of human similarities and differences across time and space"—a definition that is succinct, covering both ethnography and comparison and allowing for the Americanist four subdisciplines, and inclusive enough to incorporate almost any subject should one choose to think about it anthropologically. The emphasis in the discipline has changed and doubtless will change again over time and space, with its comparative dimensions relatively atrophied in much contemporary work—or, at least, much of the recent comparative work in anthropology has been concerned more with statistical correlations than with patterns of meaning and with the institutions and values that produce healthy societies and self-fulfilled individuals.

Anthropology has espoused two methods of approaching human nature. First, we have amassed cross-cultural evidence of human plasticity and variability through ethnography, first-hand fieldwork based on participation as well as observation. Second, we have explored psycho-biological universals—a particularly important approach in cognitive linguistics. As we have become more leery of universalist theoretical claims, we have perhaps too eagerly retreated to the safety of limited generalization from ethnographic particulars. There is much discussion these days about the absence of anthropologists among public intellectuals. The challenge we face, I believe, is to frame our ethnographically grounded understandings of the particular systems of meaning that we traditionally call cultures within larger contexts that open up dialogue across cultures. The plural, cultures, remains a significant anthropological contribution to the contemporary reformulation of relativism. The global and the local can coexist only when both sides attempt to understand one another's position. Despite dramatic differences in the structures of power across contemporary cultures, anthropologists retain the possibility of enhancing dialogue and respecting variations of value, attitude, and institutional practice.

To respect, however, does not mean to agree with. This is where the critique of relativism has gone far astray from the conventional anthropological stance. It was obvious to the classical Boasians that some cultures were healthier and more viable than others. For the exercise of evaluating cultural forms, however, accurate information about cultural differences and the meanings attached to them was essential. Armed with such a perspective, the anthropologist could turn to the familiar with a similar critical eye, using defamiliarization as an entrée to reflexivity. In an interconnected world, members of many cultures have chosen to maintain their differences and have not aspired to become part of the mainstream. The reasons for such maintenance of tradition alongside inno-

vation emerge from the empathy of the anthropologist-as-fieldworker as well as from the reflexivity of our critique. Relativism, however we now define it, remains crucial to that dialogue as well as to our identity as anthropologists.

---

**Thomas Hylland Eriksen**

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo,  
P.O. Box 1091 Blindern, N-0317 Oslo, Norway  
(t.h.eriksen@sai.uio.no). 7 I 08

Brown's effort to update and revise cultural relativism is laudable and necessary, and his thoughtful essay deserves to be widely read. Throughout the twentieth century, an obsession with difference permeated mainstream anthropology on both sides of the Atlantic. Universalist approaches ranging from Marxist and other materialist persuasions to Darwinist and psychoanalytical anthropologies were treated with suspicion and often castigated for their deductive, generalizing, and/or positivist bias. As a result, speaking about human universals or human nature has been controversial within the guild.

Brown proposes a reformed relativism which acknowledges the existence of human universals and takes into account the cultural dimensions of globalization and intrasocietal diversity but emphasizes the importance of continuing to study cultural worlds as distinctive, relatively coherent entities. His critique is timely for several reasons. Let me mention three: (1) The notorious ambivalence towards bold generalizations among contemporary anthropologists leaves important questions about human nature to reductionist positivists and butterfly-collectors. (2) The belief among nonanthropologists that we are professional moral nihilists needs to be countered. (3) The world has changed and cultural theory with it.

The AAA's criticism of universal human rights has come to stand as a symbol of anthropology's inability to deal with human suffering in a relevant way. As Brown argues, this simplistic view needs to be corrected. In fact, standard versions of cultural relativism no longer include a moral dimension; on the contrary, many of us do our best to teach first-year students that methodological relativism is necessary to grasp the native's point of view (or, rather, the natives' points of view) whereas moral relativism is a recipe for disaster. We also try to get across the view, expressed perhaps most eloquently by Geertz (1973a) and Lévi-Strauss (1983), that to arrive at a proper understanding of the universally human it is necessary to study as wide a range of variation as possible in an unprejudiced and ethically neutral way. This simple distinction is often lost in popular renditions of the anthropological project: comparative research is conflated with ethical judgement.

Although Brown's essay is an excellent point of departure for a discussion of the future of relativism, it needs to be complemented by a more nuanced analysis of what relativism was, is, and could be. In the introduction to *Rationality and Relativism*, Hollis and Lukes (1982) distinguish five forms of relativism (moral, conceptual, and perceptual, relativism of

truth, and relativism of reason). Some are uncontroversial (nobody would deny that concepts vary between languages or cultural worlds), while others are unacceptable to most (such as strong versions of the relativism of reason). In a fully developed "cultural relativism 2.0," Brown's contextualism would need to be confronted, both analytically and empirically, with the many already existing forms or degrees of relativism within and outside of anthropology. In order to arrive at a "concept of human nature that . . . has both substance and truth" (Geertz 1973a, 52), it is necessary to work out what is relative to what and—as Brown recognizes—where the relevance of relativism ends.

I am slightly disappointed with the programmatic statement at the end, which devotes several points to the notion of the cultural system but neglects a core problem in contemporary cultural theory and much anthropological research, namely, the fact that whereas culture varies in a continuous way, "cultural identities" tend to be bounded and discontinuous. Speaking to informants and observing their rituals, anthropologists often wrongly get the impression that their cultural systems are bounded, since their group identities are. There is a problem of scale here as well; it is not at all clear what counts as a cultural system. The term, along with its predecessor "a culture," inevitably creates discontinuity and borders where one might be better served by concepts depicting mixing, variation, and change. To my mind, a term such as "cultural worlds" is less reifying and carries with it less of the methodological nationalism typical of twentieth-century anthropology.

Striking a balance between a concern with universals and a concern with uniqueness is no less important today than it was 100 years ago, but solutions need to respond to the realities of our century. Keeping this preoccupation at the forefront of anthropological theorizing would not least have the advantage of preempting predictable but misguided arguments against the allegedly limitless relativism of anthropology, which are these days equally common in journalism and popular evolutionary psychology. In this regard, I find myself in total agreement with the sixth and final point of Brown's concluding programmatic statement.

At a recent conference in Tehran, I was asked by an Iranian literary theorist whether anthropology could contribute to peace. My response was that it could indeed, since it taught the virtues of respect and recognition by showing that many different ways of life could be good and fulfilling. In this lies an enduring legacy of cultural relativism that we cannot afford to relinquish, certainly not now.

---

**Robert M. Hayden**

Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh,  
Pittsburgh, PA 15260, U.S.A. (rhayden@pitt.edu). 17 XII 07

Brown's "Cultural Relativism 2.0" is a useful contribution, but he understates the importance of contextual and holistic, thus relativistic, analysis. His conclusions actually echo the

positions of Boas, whom he does not cite, if not necessarily the Boasians. “Methodological relativism” remains an essential principle if anthropologists are to have grounds for asking anybody to take them seriously. At the same time, the discussion of “ethical” relativism is incomplete without reference to the analytical concepts of othering and Orientalism.

The assertion that “to offer a convincing vision of the human condition, we must be able to strike a judicious balance between elements common to most cultural systems and those that make each group distinctive” is strikingly similar to Boas’s 1932 statement of the aims of anthropological research: “to discover among all the varieties of human behavior those that are common to all humanity” (Boas 1966, 259). When Brown sees relativism as “keeping anthropology attentive to perspectives that challenge received truth,” he again echoes Boas: when we “grasp the meaning of foreign cultures . . . we shall also be able to see how many of *our* lines of behavior that we believe to be founded deep in human nature are actually expressions of *our* culture” (1966, 259, emphasis added).

Significantly, Boas took these positions in his presidential address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science. A decade earlier, Weber (1946*a*) had described the primary contribution of science as teaching “inconvenient facts” and judged it a “moral achievement” when scientists succeeded in gaining recognition of challenges to received wisdom. Presumably reflecting the same background in German empiricism, Boas also thought that to be convincing anthropologists needed to ground their arguments on strong empirical evidence. If issues are argued only on moral grounds, there is no need for anthropologists (see D’Andrade 1995). It would be difficult to see either Boas or Weber as an amoral empiricist, but they did distinguish their claims as scientists from their political positions (see Weber 1946*b*).

Brown notes that few philosophers or social scientists would criticize methodological relativism but then says, rather dismissively, that this expression of relativism is the one “infused with the greatest professional self-interest,” since anthropologists would not be allowed to complete fieldwork were they to be overtly judgmental of the practices of their hosts. He misses the necessity of methodological relativism for achieving an analysis that is biased as little as possible by what the observer would prefer to see. Accomplishing good fieldwork *intellectually* has long been known to require the “empathy and detachment” for which Brown cites Lowie but that was more lyrically stated by Geertz (2000*b*, 40) in 1968: “To attempt to see human behavior in terms of the forces that motivate it is an essential element in understanding it,” while “to judge without understanding constitutes an offense against morality.”

Geertz abandoned this position when he suddenly rejected the idea of anthropology as objective science, seeing facts as unknowable (“after the fact”) and anthropology as “light” philosophy (Geertz 1995 and 2000*c*), while, as Brown notes, others have abandoned relativism in embracing the pursuit of human rights. Yet the necessity of contextualizing sup-

posedly moral analyses has been taken up by others. Todorov (1984) pioneered the analytical concept of the Other and pointed out the fallacy of ethical imperialism by looking at the Spanish massacres of Aztecs, which were justified in part “because of” the latter’s practices of human sacrifice. His most recent work discusses “moralizing discourses,” which actually are often not very moral and can lead to imperialistic “humanitarian” wars and their accompanying humanitarian war crimes. It is striking that Todorov, one of the world’s leading literary theorists in the late 1970s, turned to empirical research as a basis for moral philosophy, while Geertz, formerly a superb empirical researcher, turned to literary theory “light” to proclaim comparison impossible and dismiss the importance of facts “insofar as there are any” (cf. Geertz 1973*b*, 9).

Another missing paradigm is that of Orientalism, not necessarily the specifics of Said’s brilliant polemic but rather the refinements of it by scholars working outside of the Middle East such as South Asianists (e.g., Inden 1986) and Balkanists (e.g., Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992; Bakić-Hayden 1995; Todorova 1997), showing that assertions of oppositions between the supposed natural superiority of “the West” to Asians or of “Europe” to “the Balkans” are manifestations of political dominance expressed in supposedly moral terms.

As analytical paradigms, Orientalism and othering show that putatively moral discourses are often simply moralistic, self-righteous, and self-serving (Todorov 2000, 189). Todorov has pointed out that the “foundational rhetorical device of moralizing discourse” is the fallacy of the excluded middle, and his examples come from what are supposedly human rights campaigns. “Relativism,” for all its faults, provides a means to avoid this fallacy. Those who deride relativism, including anthropologists who claim to champion some particular variant of human rights, run a high risk of moralizing in the guise of making moral pronouncements.

---

#### Henrietta L. Moore

Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics, Houghton St., London WC2 2AE, UK  
(henrietta.moore@lse.ac.uk). 14 I 08

Whilst it is true that few anthropologists subscribe to strong forms of relativism—and I can find little to disagree with regarding Brown’s amended version—a number of pre-theoretical assumptions still bedevil anthropological theory and practice as a consequence of the discipline’s commitment to cultural difference and its concomitant allegiance to social constructionism. These difficulties are not resolvable through redefinition and very likely simply have to be endured, dealt with through continuing critical reflection.

Recent work in cognitive science, evolutionary psychology, and elsewhere strongly supports the view of the biological and psychic unity of humankind. If all humans share certain biological and psychological characteristics then we need to state what they are, and one way of doing this is to ask what differentiates humans from animals. Anthropology has his-

torically argued that it is culture that makes human beings distinctively human. From this perspective, humans are clever learners, “neurally plastic,” infinitely adaptive, and innovative, and consequently cultural diversity becomes the very definition of human. But should culture be understood as socially patterned behaviours or as symbolic systems, values, and meanings? On the one hand, neural plasticity is not confined to humans, and socially patterned behaviours dependent on certain sensorimotor and learning capacities are common both in non-human primates and in non-primate mammals. On the other, while there are those who argue that non-human primates have the capacity for language and symbolism, culture understood as symbolic systems, values, and meanings is not widespread in non-human primates. Whether humanity is premised on culture therefore depends on the definition of culture (Moore and Sanders 2005). It has been suggested that rather than seeing humans as biological entities with the capacity to acquire culture, we should recognize them as biologically cultural beings who develop through relations with cultural others. In this formulation individual and culture are ontogenetically related (e.g., Toren 1999; Robertson 1996), and this implies is that humans are not socially constructed in the sense of culture acting upon a pre-given biological entity but also, as Brown suggests, that cultural diversity cannot be explained by reference to cognitive and other universals alone. However, the weaknesses of anthropological explanation have less to do with dislike of comparison and commitment to cultural particularism than with unexamined assumptions about social construction.

As Brown points out, contemporary anthropology takes it as axiomatic that cultures are not fixed and bounded entities, that they are internally diverse, and that individuals may have more than one. However, despite recent attempts to dethrone “culture” as the organizing principle of anthropological endeavour, the link between culture and social constructionist thinking remains strong. A discipline based on cultural difference must have ways of determining what is local. Cultural difference presupposes the existence of different forms of belief, knowledge, and ultimately types of agency. Anthropology has historically resolved some of the challenges inherent in the presumption of incommensurability between cultures by resorting to the idea that actions, beliefs, and motivations, however strange, are rational in context. This ethical position, underpinned by assumptions about a shared humanity, is desirable from many perspectives, but it has little theoretical purchase when it comes to studying forms of knowledge and agency in many contemporary contexts.

An ethical commitment to rationality-in-difference runs the risk of overattaching us to our differences and our contexts. What is problematic here is the links between a notion of the local and the concept of culture, links that find considerable reinforcement through the discipline’s commitment to ethnographic particularism. At the core of the problem is perhaps the kinds of subjects we imagine others to be. Several important strands of thought on this topic call for reflection.

The first is the assumption that people are in some reasonably direct sense the product of the world they live in. As Gellner (1968 [1959], 15) pointed out, the idea that categories and concepts are functional within a “form of life” implies that the world is unproblematic. It also places a premium on understanding local categories as if there were nothing problematic about ordinary language and the interpretation of categories were self-evident and uncontested. Such a model is in danger simultaneously both of confining people to their worlds in a way which is ultimately unreasonable and of over-privileging the understanding of categories as obvious, self-contained, and “natural.” Individuals’ self-interpretations are never completely transparent either to themselves or to others, but neither are they completely determined by context.

Anthropology has been struggling to link individual agency to culture through a reformulation of theories of the experiencing and acting self. The model of the self that has emerged is one that is self-produced in interaction with others and with cultural categories but retains a capacity for creation (Moore 2007). This model sets limits to cultural determinism through its assumption that culture does not determine individual agency, although it does set out the patterns within which that agency becomes intelligible and through which it is open to consideration and reflection by the acting individual and others.

---

### Fred Myers

Department of Anthropology, New York University, 25 Waverly Place, New York, NY 10003, U.S.A. (frm1@nyu.edu). 7 I 08

The thoroughness with which Brown approaches the current status of relativism in anthropology is welcome. He is correct in saying that the practice of most anthropologists has evolved significantly from the positions often assigned to the profession by critics and supporters of various strands of universalism or moral absolutism.

Brown’s discussion is helpful in clarifying some of the distinct positions from which criticism of relativism is raised, thus contributing to a more reasoned consideration of what dimensions of relativism might need to be defended, rethought, or discarded. This remains a vital enterprise, but the predicament may be more vexed than his reasoned tone and calm good sense suggest. Despite his argument that radical alterity and incommensurability are on the wane, cultural difference remains an extraordinary challenge to civic and intellectual life.

I can think of three strong challenges that have emerged recently and offer them to extend and specify Brown’s consideration. One is the response of some scientists to challenges to “cognitive universalism,” most provocatively articulated in the controversy over the *Social Text* publication of a satirical essay (Sokal 1996a, 1996b) pretending to be a postmodernist challenge to the claims of physics. This controversy crystallized a rejection of attempts by cultural analysts to deconstruct (or

relativize) scientific knowledge and a defense of scientific positivism.

Another involves the critical discussion of secularism and the rise of various “fundamentalisms.” This problem is now articulated in changing relations of power. Perhaps the greatest challenge to relativism among anthropologists has been working with what Susan Harding called “the repugnant Cultural Other” (1991)—people whose claims to truth are meant to include the anthropological interlocutor, whom they seek to convert or even silence—rather than Others abroad. In another register, there is the claim that universal human rights discourse is itself “cultural” rather than transcendent. Saba Mahmood (2005) and Talal Asad (2007) have sought to interpret the claims of pious Muslim women and suicide bombers, respectively, to reveal the ethnocentric fantasies of the supposedly tolerant secular West. Does this criticism of secularism and even of anthropology’s own (secular?) position of tolerance make anthropology just one more cultural practice among others? What might be the position of the anthropologist with respect to radical religious claims that would interdict anthropological analysis?

A third challenge involves the anthropological representation of Others engaged in political struggle with institutions and publics identified with the anthropologist. In the recent controversy concerning government policies towards Australia’s indigenous people (inaugurated in a panic about high rates of violence, sexual abuse of children, and poor health), relativist anthropological representations of “traditional” indigenous practices (such as male initiation, bestowal of young women on older men, and domestic violence) came under widespread attack in op-ed pieces by some anthropologists and even some indigenous leaders as supportive of pathologies. In ways reminiscent of D’Souza’s (1995) radical rightist argument, some of these pieces insisted that anthropologists had been complicit with the rising violence in “excusing” such behavior as culturally warranted, playing it down to produce more positive accounts of these communities. Lawyers and judges have used citation of customary traditional behavior to excuse Aboriginal defendants from the strict application of Australian law. Leaving aside the question of government accountability, the distanced stance of relativism was, for some anthropologists (see Sutton 2001), unacceptable in the face of the loss through death and disease of Indigenous friends and consultants in remote communities.

Yet, how is one to approach critical discussion of cultural practices with communities long subjected to disapproval, racism, and government supervision of their behavior? Brown’s exploration of dialogical negotiation offers a possibility, but given the transformed power relations between subjects and researchers the position from which to sustain this dialogue may not be available to “outside” researchers.

How do we imagine that people might assess different outcomes? Is it clear that ordinary forms of relativism provide no guidance for such considerations? Would people exchange

their mobility and autonomy for better health? Are there other ways to imagine such choices?

Anthropologists must be methodologically relativistic to understand how things fit together. After that, there may be a variety of ways to work out the issue of judgment, but it would seem that the idea of *certain* knowledge of what is good and bad is hardly suitable for the world in which we live. Science is not the singular authority of public life. Various people now clearly have the power to present their own views, goals, and values. In this nexus, Brown’s proposal of a dialogical engagement is a very productive one.

---

#### Richard A. Shweder

Department of Comparative Human Development, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 60637, U.S.A. (rshd@uchicago.edu). 14 I 08

Brown thinks well, writes well, and always manages to engage big issues in a provocative and eye-opening way. A brief response cannot do justice to the range of issues he raises. He is surely correct: it seems to be a trade secret that contemporary American anthropology is no longer unified around a doctrine of “cultural relativism.” And I fully appreciate the point that “if we are to be denounced by relativism’s critics” it should be for the version of relativism (I prefer the term “pluralism”) to which we subscribe. For the sake of argument, however, I want to suggest that the downsizing of cultural relativism in American anthropology is not necessarily a measure of progress. I don’t view it as a move from disciplinary adolescence to disciplinary maturity. Quite the contrary, I worry that it is partially responsible for our failure to get across an important moral message in a multicultural world in which not only mutual tolerance but even mutual suffering is in short supply.

And, although I don’t have space to elaborate, I would suggest that the fashionable anthropological embrace of a global human rights discourse is part of the problem. Human rights activists are prone to make ethnocentric judgments under the banner of an insufficiently analyzed set of presumed “inalienable” rights, which is precisely what the AAA executive board members feared when they first refused to endorse the “Universal Declaration on the Rights of Man.” Whether the issue is free speech, separation of church and state, respect for women, or children’s rights, one readily perceives in human rights discourse (depending on speaker and context) the face of bourgeois liberal feminism, American constitutionalism as interpreted by our Supreme Court, or middle-class Judeo-Christian family life in North America or Western Europe today. Figuring out how to have moral realism without the ethnocentrism is one of our major challenges—Brown takes it up and is fully aware of its import and complexities—but as a result of three decades of downsizing our students have become intellectually less well equipped to address some key issues that were center stage in the heyday of cultural relativism.

What is the moral message I have in mind, which I view as the central message of Anthropology 101? I would put it this way: Many of the things we take for granted as natural, divinely given, logically necessary, or practically indispensable for life in an orderly, safe, and decent society are neither natural, divinely given, logically necessary, nor practically indispensable for such life. They are products of a local history, ways of seeing and being in the world that may lend meaning and value to our own form of life but not the only ways to lead a meaningful and valuable life. They are (in some sense that needs to be spelled out in detail) discretionary forms, not mandatory ones. They include everything from gender relations to forms of political authority and conceptions of the relationship between the social order and the moral order.

This is not a message that must be soft on tyranny, irrationality, or arbitrary rule. It is not the same as saying that each society is a homogeneous block (the issue of internal diversity, of majority/orthodox versus minority/heterodox views, seems like a red herring to me, without much theoretical significance for issues of who is morally right and who is morally wrong—oppositional views are not necessarily superior). The message is not the same as saying either that (1) whatever is, is okay, (2) anything goes as long as you have the power to enforce it, (3) because something is different it is entitled to our respect, or (4) the grounds for judging a moral claim valid are *entirely* local. One can reject all of those four propositions of “radical relativism” while at the same time endorsing the claims that (1) diversity is inherent in the human condition, (2) (for good and understandable reasons) even when there is “a community of conversation across cultures,” securing universal agreement about which particular beliefs, values, goals, and practices are good, true, beautiful, or effective is rarely possible, and (3) the ecumenical impulse to treasure uniformity or convergence of customs and convictions and to overlook, devalue, or even eradicate difference or disagreement is not necessarily a good thing. I don’t think the ancestral figures associated with relativism in anthropology (Boas, Benedict, Herskovits) were “radical relativists,” and I suspect that more anthropologists were trained to draw the relevant distinctions, get the pluralistic message straight, and think about its conceptual foundations in 1947 than today. As our profession tries to distance itself from the doctrine that led the AAA executive board to reject the UN “Declaration” as ethnocentric, it would be comforting to believe that the true message of Anthropology 101 is still something we care to defend and to teach.

---

**Richard Ashby Wilson**

Department of Anthropology, University of Connecticut, U-1205, Storrs, CT 06269, U.S.A. (richard.wilson@uconn.edu). 5 I 08

Brown has provided us with an admirably up-to-date, comprehensive, and balanced assessment of cultural relativism, a doctrine that has had a long-standing association with U.S.

cultural anthropology. He finds value in a number of cultural relativism’s central tenets, namely, its concern with processes of socialization and enculturation, its sensitivity to context and meaning, its emphasis on tolerance and empathy, and its opposition to an evolutionary ranking of societies.

At the same time, he shows an awareness of relativism’s limitations. Relativism’s account of organic and autonomous cultural islands (what Thomas Hylland Eriksen [1993] calls an “archipelago” theory of culture) does not correspond to a globalized and interconnected world. As a theory of knowledge, cultural relativism is paradoxical and self-contradictory in that it makes universal claims while denying the possibility of universal claims and undercuts any truth grounds upon which its own claims might be evaluated. Finally, its lack of any definite guiding moral principle has made it an especially convenient ideology for authoritarian forms of governance, from Herderian *Sturm und Drang* nationalism to apartheid in South Africa and the Indonesian dictator Suharto’s misappropriation of “Asian values.”

Faced with this complexity, Brown takes the philosophically sound course of disaggregating the constituent elements and exploring the territory that lies between relativism and universalism. Yet the discussion takes a perplexing turn when he equates universalism with natural law, since natural law has few modern adherents, at least since the critiques of natural rights of Jeremy Bentham (1843) and the twentieth century’s most influential legal philosopher, H. L. A. Hart (1961). In my interviews with lawyers and human rights professionals over the past 20 years (e.g., Wilson 2001), non-foundationalist defenses of rights are significantly more prevalent and are conventionally based upon pragmatism (“these ideas have positive consequences”) or legal positivism (“law is only the codes, statutes, and regulations enacted in positive law and does not derive from morality”). Brown presents a hardened and somewhat immoderate characterization of universalism, but his conceptual mainstay of Cultural Relativism 2.0, “dialogical morality,” is inspired by cosmopolitan liberal theorists such as Seyla Benhabib and the more moderate form of liberal universalism known as “deliberative democracy.”

Having reaped the intellectual rewards of unpacking cultural relativism, it is unclear what is to be gained by repackaging a slightly new set of components and calling them “Cultural Relativism 2.0.” Brown states that cultural relativism is “not . . . a comprehensive philosophy or doctrine,” but that is precisely what both cultural relativism and universalism are, if they are anything at all. They are doctrines, philosophical systems that assert some kind of indivisible coherence between their constituent parts. This synergy creates a higher-order unity, otherwise there would be no point in including the various elements under a single conceptual banner. Rather than resolving the dilemmas that arise as a result of the universalism/relativism divide, the attempt to revitalize cultural relativism perpetuates the quandaries of doctrinal thinking. Instead of seeking to integrate them into a metanarrative, it would be more productive to remain in that uneasy middle



ground and embark upon a sustained discussion of how anthropologists might usefully employ and combine the various subcomponents such as methodological relativism and democratic dialogue.

From what I can tell, I share much of Brown's overall vision of the future of anthropology. We are both concerned with developing anthropology as a comparative discipline that creates generalizable theories about wide-ranging patterns in human social life. What anthropology can offer is ethnography and social theory that are not provincial and built upon the assumptions of industrialized societies in North America and Europe. Rather, anthropological theory and methods have greater potential to formulate a genuinely global frame of reference through encounter and dialogue with a broader array of societies than is conventionally found in other social sciences. As Brown suggests, anthropologists can certainly benefit from methodological caution and humility (hitherto associated most strongly with relativism) when approaching the tremendous diversity of beliefs and practices. We may also need to accept the cognitive unity of humankind and chart the long-distance interconnections forged through global networks of exchange (hitherto associated most strongly with universalism). These, however, are values, research practices, techniques, and theoretical dispositions that anthropologists deploy during ethnographic research and theoretical analysis. In this debate, at least, there is little to be gained from forcing them into the confines of any one philosophical doctrine, however redefined.

---

## Reply

A hazard of reviving an old chestnut—and, for anthropologists, can a discussion of cultural relativism be anything else?—is that one's forebears are likely to have said some of the same things, only better. Clifford Geertz's memorable reflections on relativism, cited by Hayden and Eriksen, are a case in point. (I am consoled by recognition that Geertz said just about *everything* better.) Despite the likelihood that my effort to update cultural relativism has sometimes restated the obvious or shortchanged the wisdom of someone's revered intellectual ancestor, the commentators' supportive response suggests that I have gotten a few important things right. I am especially grateful for their suggestions of ways in which this debate might be broadened and clarified.

Darnell succinctly summarizes the aim of classical cultural relativism when she declares that it "provided a standpoint from which dialogues could be framed with others," thus permitting "both sides [to] attempt to understand one another's position." This near-truism is based on an assumption far from truistic: that such understanding is achievable. The reward structures of contemporary anthropology favor novel and often extreme positions, including notions of radical al-

terity and hostility to systematic comparison, that have sometimes stripped cultural relativism of the analytical balance without which it can easily spiral into self-parody. As Eriksen observes, this is the face of relativism most familiar to anthropology's critics. One of my goals has been to stake out middle ground, a vital center, from which anthropology can reclaim the philosophically and ethically defensible elements of cultural relativism that have been ours from the beginning.

Darnell and Shweder note that features of Cultural Relativism 2.0 were presaged in the work of Boas and his students, including Herskovits. This is consistent with my view that classical cultural relativism is hardly as rigid as it is sometimes portrayed. The Boasians were sophisticated intellectuals, possessed of supple minds and a passionate commitment to spreading the message of anthropology in a world that needed it badly. Like us, though, they were creatures of their place and time. Anthropologists have learned a great deal in the past half century, and I believe that cultural relativism needs recalibration to reflect our increased understanding. To name a few such advances: recognition that all cultural systems encompass significant internal diversity, that social identities are created dialectically rather than drawing on essential qualities, that human cultural variability, although great, is not limitless, and that anthropology cannot be seen as a value-free way of knowing. The conviction that cultural relativism necessarily offers a path to freedom and tolerance is also undermined by the comfortable marriage of relativism to consumer capitalism (Hoggart 1998; Handler 2005). This does not invalidate cultural relativism, but it does argue for prudence in its application.

I happily defer to Wilson's deep knowledge of human-rights law by conceding that my account of universalism oversimplifies a range of perspectives, some of which he outlines in his comment. In reviewing critiques of cultural relativism offered by scholars with backgrounds in philosophy, religion, and political science, however, I am struck by how often they take universal ethical values for granted rather than articulating and defending them systematically. Most of these works grant moral universals a naturalness that cultural relativism is alleged to violate.

More baffling is his insistence that cultural relativism qualifies as a coherent doctrine. As an analytical strategy, it is consistent to the extent that it deploys relativistic logic. Yet with the possible exception of methodological relativism, with which I have no quarrel, cultural relativism is afflicted with enough logical contradictions to provide guaranteed employment to several generations of philosophers. Aren't we better off thinking of it instead as a principle akin to Occam's Razor, a guideline to be applied unless other approaches offer more convincing answers?

Eriksen, Hayden, Moore, Myers, and Shweder engage the issue of Otherness from various angles. Treating different cultural communities as other with respect to one's own is the most elemental expression of ethnocentrism. This is hardly news. Today, however, we know more about the social and

symbolic nuances of othering than did Boas and his contemporaries. Eriksen rightly observes that groups have a strong tendency to define their external boundaries more rigidly than is warranted by actual social practice, especially when they feel threatened. Identifying and stigmatizing deviant members within the group may be no less important to processes of identity creation. We now recognize that cultural constraints are everywhere counterbalanced by some degree of individual agency. These factors militate against a simplistic, mechanical identification of culture with behavior, either as explanation or as moral justification.

Shweder is one of anthropology's most skilled practitioners of disciplined cultural relativism, especially in response to what he regards as ethnocentric moralizing in the name of universal human rights. But human-rights discourse is only one facet of anthropology's new embrace of moral rhetoric, the pervasiveness of which would have shocked Boas. Today we scarcely blink when an inflammatory expression such as "cultural genocide" is applied to situations in which the more neutral (if analytically problematic) term "acculturation" might have sufficed a generation ago. One needn't accept every element of D'Andrade's critique of moral models (1995) to share his unease about the discipline's move toward frank advocacy and the routine use of highly charged moral language. Still unclear is whether this new fondness for high dudgeon will undermine the credibility of anthropological expertise in courtrooms and policy arenas that value the dispassionate presentation of evidence in pursuit of social justice.

Myers cuts to the heart of the issue when he insists that "certain knowledge of what is good and bad is hardly suitable for the world in which we live." His bold statement is not, as anthropology's critics might have it, a declaration of moral nihilism. I interpret it as a call to pause before judging, to listen before speaking, and to widen one's views before narrowing them. That is what cultural relativism has always been about. Today we need it more than ever. Needed, too, is the will to think critically about relativism's seductions and analytical shortcomings.

—Michael F. Brown

## References Cited

- AAA. 1947. Statement on human rights. *American Anthropologist* 49:539–43.
- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others. *American Anthropologist* 104:783–90.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2006. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Arkes, Hadley. 1986. *First things: An inquiry into the first principles of morals and justice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Asad, Talal. 1986. The concept of cultural translation in British social anthropology. In *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, 141–64. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2007. *On suicide bombing*. New York: Columbia University Press. [FM]
- Aya, Rod. 1996. The devil in social anthropology, or, The empiricist exorcist; or, The case against cultural relativism. In *The social philosophy of Ernest Gellner*, ed. John A. Hall and Ian Jarvie, 553–62. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Bakić-Hayden, Milica. 1995. Nesting Orientalisms: The case of Yugoslavia. *Slavic Review* 54:917–31.
- Bakić-Hayden, Milica, and Robert Hayden. 1992. Orientalist variations on the theme 'Balkans.'" *Slavic Review* 50:1–5.
- Benhabib, Seyla. 1995. Cultural complexity, moral interdependence, and the global dialogical community. In *Women, culture, and development: A study of human capabilities*, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover, 235–55. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bennett, William J. 2002. *Why we fight: Moral clarity and the war on terrorism*. New York: Doubleday.
- Bentham, Jeremy. 1843. Critique of the doctrine of inalienable, natural rights. In *The works of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. 2, ed. John Bowring. Edinburgh: William Tait. [RAW]
- Bloch, Maurice. 2005. Where did anthropology go? or The need for "human nature." In *Essays on cultural transmission*. London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology 75. Oxford: Berg.
- Bloch, Maurice, and Dan Sperber. 2002. Kinship and evolved psychological dispositions. *Current Anthropology* 43: 723–48.
- Boas, Franz. 1966. The aims of anthropological research. In *Race, language, and culture*, 243–59. New York: Free Press.
- Boudon, Raymond. 2004. *The poverty of relativism*. Oxford: Bardwell Press.
- Brown, Donald E. 1991. *Human universals*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Brown, Wendy. 2006. *Regulating aversion: Tolerance in the age of identity and empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus, eds. 1986. *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Comte, Auguste. 1976 (1830–42). Characteristics of the positive method in its application to social phenomena. In *Auguste Comte: The foundation of society*, ed. Kenneth Thompson. London: Nelson.
- Cook, John W. 1999. *Morality and cultural differences*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cove, John R. 1999. Cultural relativism in the Americanist tradition: From anthropological method to indigenous emancipation. In *Theorizing the Americanist tradition*, ed. Lisa P. Valentine and Regna Darnell, 108–20. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Cowan, Jane K., Marie-Bénédicte Dembour, and Richard A. Wilson, eds. 2001. *Culture and rights: Anthropological perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Cronk, Lee. 1999. *That complex whole: Culture and the evolution of human behavior*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- D'Andrade, Roy. 1995. Moral models in anthropology. *Current Anthropology* 36:399–408. [RMH]
- Dembour, Marie-Bénédicte. 2001. Following the movement of a pendulum: Between universalism and relativism. In *Culture and rights: Anthropological perspectives*, ed. Jane K. Cowan, Marie-Bénédicte Dembour, and Richard A. Wilson, 56–79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Denby, David. 2005. Herder: Culture, anthropology, and the Enlightenment. *History of the Human Sciences* 18(1):55–76.
- Diamond, Stanley. 1974. *In search of the primitive: A critique of civilization*. New Brunswick: Transaction Books.
- D'Souza, Dinesh. 1995. *The end of racism: Principles for a multiracial society*. New York: Free Press.
- Eagleton, Terry. 2003. *After theory*. New York: Basic Books.
- Edgerton, Robert B. 1992. *Sick societies: Challenging the myth of primitive harmony*. New York: Free Press.
- Engle, Karen. 2001. From skepticism to embrace: Human rights and the American Anthropological Association from 1947 to 1999. *Human Rights Quarterly* 23:536–59.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 1993. Do cultural islands exist? *SocialAnthropology* 1(3):133–47. [RAW]
- Everett, Daniel L. 2005. Cultural constraints on grammar and cognition in Pirahã. *Current Anthropology* 46:621–46.
- Fernandez, James W. 1990. Tolerance in a repugnant world and other dilemmas in the cultural relativism of Melville J. Herskovits. *Ethos* 18:140–64.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973a. The impact of the concept of culture on the concept of man. In *The interpretation of cultures*, 33–54. New York: Basic Books. [THE]
- . 1973b. Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books. [RMH]
- . 1995. *After the fact*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. [RMH]
- . 2000a. Anti anti-relativism. In *Available light*, 42–67. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2000b. Thinking as a moral act: Ethical dimensions of anthropological fieldwork in the new states. In *Available light: Anthropological reflections of philosophical topics*, 21–41. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [RMH]
- . 2000c. *Available light: Anthropological reflections on philosophical topics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [RMH]
- Gellner, Ernest. 1968 (1959). *Words and things*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. [HLM]
- . 1985. *Relativism and the social sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1992. *Postmodernism, reason, and religion*. New York: Routledge.
- Glendon, Mary Ann. 2001. *A world made new: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. New York: Random House.
- Goodale, Mark. 2006. Toward a critical anthropology of human rights. *Current Anthropology* 47:485–511.
- Handler, Richard. 2005. *Critics against culture: Anthropological observers of mass society*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Harding, Susan. 1991. Representing fundamentalism: The problem of the repugnant cultural other. *Social Research* 58:373–93. [FM]
- Harrison, Simon. 2003. Cultural difference as denied resemblance: Reconsidering nationalism and ethnicity. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45:343–61.
- Hart, H. L. A. 1961. *The concept of law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [RAW]
- Hatch, Elvin. 1983. *Culture and morality: The relativity of values in anthropology*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hauser, Marc D. 2006. *Moral minds: How nature designed our universal sense of right and wrong*. New York: Ecco/Harper Collins.
- Herskovits, Melville J. 1972. *Cultural relativism: Perspectives in cultural pluralism*. Ed. Frances Herskovits. New York: Random House.
- Hoggart, Richard. 1998. *The tyranny of relativism: Culture and politics in contemporary English society*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Hollis, Martin, and Steven Lukes, eds. 1982. *Rationality and relativism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell/Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Howard, Rhoda. 1995. *Human rights and the search for community*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Ignatieff, Michael. 2001. Human rights as politics. In *Human rights as politics and idolatry*, ed. Amy Gutmann, 3–52. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Inden, Ronald. 1986. Orientalist constructions of India. *Modern Asia Studies* 20:401–46. [RMH]
- Jarvie, I. C. 1984. *Rationality and relativism: In search of a philosophy and history of anthropology*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- . 1993. Relativism yet again. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 23:537–47.
- Joyce, Richard. 2006. *The evolution of morality*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Kluckhohn, Clyde. 1955. Ethical relativism: *Sic et non*. *Journal of Philosophy* 52:663–77.
- Koepping, Klaus-Peter. 1955. Enlightenment and romanticism in the work of Adolf Bastian: The historical roots of anthropology in the nineteenth century. In *Fieldwork and footnotes: Studies in the history of European anthropology*, ed. Han F. Vermeulen and Arturo Alvarez Roldán, 75–91. London: Routledge.
- Kroeber, A. L. 1952. *The nature of culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 2004. Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical Inquiry* 30(Winter):225–48.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1972 (1955). *Tristes tropiques: An an-*

- thropological study of primitive societies in Brazil*. Trans. John Russell. New York: Atheneum.
- . 1983. L'ethnologue devant la condition humaine. In *Le regard éloigné*, 49–62. Paris: Plon. [THE]
- Lewis, Herbert S. 1999. The misrepresentation of anthropology and its consequences. *American Anthropologist* 100: 716–31.
- Li, Xiaorong. 2006. *Ethics, human rights, and culture: Beyond relativism and universalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lowie, Robert H. 1956. Reminiscences of anthropological currents in America half a century ago. *American Anthropologist* 58:995–1016.
- . 1981 (1960). Empathy, or “seeing from within.” In *Culture in history: Essays in honor of Paul Radin*, ed. Stanley Diamond, 145–59. New York: Octagon Books.
- Lukes, Steven. 2003. *Liberals and cannibals: The implications of diversity*. London: Verso.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1985. Relativism, power, and philosophy. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 59(1):5–22.
- . 2000. Toleration and the goods of conflict. In *The politics of toleration in modern life*, ed. Susan Mendus, 133–55. Durham: Duke University Press.
- McKinnon, Susan. 2005. *Neo-liberal genetics: The myths and moral tales of evolutionary psychology*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- McKinnon, Susan, and Sydel Silverman, eds. *Complexities: Beyond nature and culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [FM]
- Meiland, Jack W., and Michael Krausz, eds. *Relativism: Cognitive and moral*. Notre Dame: University of Natre Dame Press.
- Merry, Sally Engle. 2001. Changing rights, changing culture. In *Culture and rights: Anthropological perspectives*, ed. Jane K. Cowan, Marie-Bénédicte Dembour, and Richard A. Wilson, 31–55. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2006. *Human rights and gender violence: Translating international law into local justice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Messer, Ellen. 1993. Anthropology and human rights. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22:221–49.
- Montaigne, Michel de. 2004. *The essays of Montaigne*. Trans. Charles Cotton. The Gutenberg Project. <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/3600> (accessed August 8, 2007).
- Moody-Adams, Michele M. 1997. *Fieldwork in familiar places: Morality, culture, and philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Moore, Henrietta. 2005. The truths of anthropology. *Cambridge Anthropology* 25(1):52–58.
- . 2007. *The subject of anthropology: Gender, symbolism, and psychoanalysis*. Cambridge: Polity Press. [HLM]
- Moore, H. L., and T. Sanders. 2005. Anthropology and epistemology. In *Anthropology in theory: Issues in epistemology*, ed. Henrietta L. Moore and T. Sanders. Oxford: Blackwell. [HLM]
- Nagengast, Carole. 1997. Women, minorities, and indigenous peoples: Universalism and cultural relativity. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 53:349–69.
- Pinker, Steven. 2002. *The blank slate: The modern denial of human nature*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Povinelli, Elizabeth A. 2001. Radical worlds: The anthropology of incommensurability and inconceivability. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30:319–34.
- Rawls, John. 1971. *A theory of justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Renteln, Alison Dundes. 1988. Relativism and the search for human rights. *American Anthropologist* 90:56–72.
- Richerson, Peter J., and Robert Boyd. 2005. *Not by genes alone: How culture transformed human evolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Robertson, A. F. 1996. The development of meaning: Ontogeny and culture. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2:591–610. [HLM]
- Rorty, Amélie Oksenberg. 1989. Relativism, persons, and practices. In *Relativism: Interpretation and confrontation*, ed. Michael Krausz, 418–40. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1986. On ethnocentrism: A reply to Geertz. *Michigan Quarterly Review* 25:525–34.
- Rubin, Gayle. 1975. The traffic in women: Notes on the “political economy” of sex. In *Toward an anthropology of women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter, 157–210. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Shone, Steve J. 2004. Cultural relativism and the savage: The alleged inconsistency of William Graham Sumner. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 63:697–715.
- Shweder, Richard A. 1990. Ethical relativism. Is there a defensible version? *Ethos* 18:205–18.
- . 2003. *Why do men barbecue? Recipes for cultural psychology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Sokal, Alan. 1996a. Transgressing the boundaries: Towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity. *Social Text* 46/47:217–52. [FM]
- . 1996b. A physicist experiments with cultural studies. *Lingua Franca*. May. [FM]
- Spiro, Melford E. 1986. Cultural relativism and the future of anthropology. *Cultural Anthropology* 1:259–86.
- Stocking, George W., Jr. 1968. Franz Boas and the culture concept in historical perspective. *Race, culture, and evolution: Essays in the history of anthropology*, 195–233. New York: Free Press.
- . 1992. *The ethnographer's magic and other essays in the history of anthropology*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

- . 1995. *After Tylor: British social anthropology 1888–1951*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Stoll, David. 2006. The value of liberalism and truth standards. *Anthropology News* 47(6):7–8.
- Strang, Veronica. 2006. A happy coincidence? Symbiosis and synthesis in anthropological and indigenous knowledges. *Current Anthropology* 47:981–1008.
- Sutton, Peter. 2001. The politics of suffering: Indigenous policy in Australia since the 1970s. *Anthropological Forum* 11(2):125–73. [FM]
- Taylor, Mark C. 2007. *After God*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tilley, John J. 2000. Cultural relativism. *Human Rights Quarterly* 22:501–47.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 1984. *The Conquest of America: The question of the other*. New York: Harper and Row. [RMH]
- . 2000. *Hope and memory: Lessons from the twentieth century*. Trans. David Bellos. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Todorova, Maria. 1997. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press. [RMH]
- Toren, C. 1999. *Mind, materiality, and history: Explorations in Fijian ethnography*. London: Routledge. [HLM]
- Turner, Terence, and Carole Nagengast, eds. 1997. *Special issue on human rights*. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 53 (3).
- Weber, Max. 1946a. Science as a vocation. In *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 129–56. New York: Oxford University Press. [RMH]
- . 1946b. Politics as a vocation. In *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 77–128. New York: Oxford University Press. [RMH]
- Webster, Steven. 1995. Escaping post-cultural tribes. *Critique of Anthropology* 15:381–413.
- Wesch, Michael. 2007. A witch hunt in New Guinea: Anthropology on trial. *Anthropology and Humanism* 32(1): 4–17.
- West, Harry G. 2007. *Ethnographic sorcery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, Bryan R., ed. 1970. *Rationality*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Wilson, Richard A., ed. 1997. *Human rights, culture, and context: Anthropological perspectives*. London: Pluto Press.
- . 2001. *The politics of truth and reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the post-apartheid state*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [RAW]
- . 2006. The moral imperialism critique is not valid. *Anthropology News* 47(6):7.
- Yengoyan, Aram A. 2006. Comparison and its discontents. In *Modes of comparison: Theory and practice*, ed. Aram A. Yengoyan, 137–58. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Zechenter, Elizabeth M. 1997. In the name of culture: Cultural relativism and the abuse of the individual. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 53:319–47.