

TOWARDS AN APOLOGY FOR
CULTURAL RELATIVITY IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The history of the concept of the relativity of cultures is briefly surveyed. Cultural relativity is distinguished from cultural relativism as well as from moral relativism. Franz Boas, through having done much which eventually transformed the spirit, role, technique, and aims of anthropology, is identified as having heralded the genesis of 20th century concepts of the relativity of cultures. His background is compared with that of Albert Einstein whose phenomenal popularity included renown for his brainchild relativity theories. Boas' professional dominance, the incidental impetus of a publicly popular romanticised notion of 'relativity' and the eagerness of some anthropologists to 'decenter' their epistemic vantage points and professional world views prepared the way for the eventual formulation of a radical cultural relativism. In conclusion, the modern re-emergence of the belief in the relativity of cultures is assessed as having been a cause for the generation of at least as much light and enlightenment as finger-burning fire within our efforts to properly study humankind.

RESUME

L'article expose brièvement l'historique du concept de "relativité des cultures". On distinguera la notion de "relativité culturelle" de celles de "relativisme culturel" et de "relativisme moral". Franz Boas, dont les éminents travaux ont abouti à une redéfinition de la conception, du rôle, des techniques et des objectifs mêmes de cette science qu'est l'anthropologie, est ici présenté comme le grand précurseur des concepts de "relativité des cultures" du vingtième siècle. On peut comparer ses hypothèses de base à celles d'Albert Einstein dont l'immense succès populaire reposait sur sa théorie de la relativité, célèbre soit, mais tout-à-fait personnelle. L'autorité de Boas en la matière, les inconvénients inhérents à cette notion de "relativité" aussi populaire et aussi empreinte de romantisme, ainsi que la volonté de certains anthropologues de remettre en question leurs convictions en matière d'épistémologie et de modifier leur regard de professionnels sur le monde ont ouvert la voie vers un relativisme culturel radical. En conclusion, on estime que la croyance en la notion de "relativité des culture" et surtout le renouveau qu'elle connaît actuellement ont apporté à nos efforts pour une étude aussi

juste que possible de l'espèce humaine, au moins autant d'éclaircissements et de connaissances que d'hérésies.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of "cultural relativity" had flourished during the two decades preceding Dr. Melville Herskovits' untimely focus upon it in the post-war period (i.e. Herskovits 1948, 1955). Eric Wolf in 1964 noted that previous to the second World War it was the desire of anthropologists to "approximate the native" because native culture then served as the "point of reference", but this shifted in the post-war years so that gradually the "point of reference" became the anthropologists' own culture (Wolf 1964:14).

Herskovits' efforts at attempting to seriously attend to the notion of cultural relativity have attracted, as of the early 1980s, nearly three decades of keen dissection and scrutiny by numerous philosophers (e.g. Bidney 1953; Schmidt 1955; Sylvester 1959; Nowell-Smith 1971; Jarvie 1975; Cunningham 1979j and others) and the publication of a disapproving critique by a colleague and former collaborator, Robert Redfield (Redfield 1953).¹

Despite the heavy criticism directed at cultural relativism during the past several decades, I.C. Jarvie has noted that "...anthropological opinion is divided on the issue--although one suspects that relativists, tacit and avowed, far outnumber anti-relativists--but the two sides seem content inside their fixed positions" (Jarvie 1975:343). Jarvie's own understanding of the cultural relativist's key argument is that "...they can see no way of rationally justifying standards that transcend the boundaries of time, society, and culture. Thus they see no rational justification for ranking societies morally, cognitively, or culturally" (Jarvie 1975:344).

According to Merwyn Garbarino, along with the belief that there is no universal standard by which cultures might be measured, those who support the concept of the relativity of cultures espouse the equal validity of all cultures and maintain that only on their own terms can they be understood (Garbarino 1977:101).

Frank Cunningham an intellectual descendant of David Bidney, succinctly relays a sense of the relativist's perspective which does not necessarily entail any particular ethical point of view when he asserts that : "Relativists argue that contradictory beliefs can both be true depending on who holds them" (Cunningham 1979:45; emphasis added).

There are several problems that are inherent, as the philosophers have not hesitated to indicate, in the "doctrine" of cultural relativism. It appears that the major problem, from which other difficulties inevitably result, is that an understanding of what the relativity of cultures actually means has, as Dr. Nowell-Smith claims and I.C. Jarvie confirms, been for the most part, taken for granted. Nowell-Smith states that,

...because it is seldom set out in detail, still less defended by argument, it is difficult to discover

precisely what the doctrine is, or even what sort of a doctrine it is -- an empirical thesis, a conceptual analysis of such terms as 'culture', 'mores', 'value' and 'duty', or a set of injunctions and prohibitions that we are asked to accept on moral or on methodological grounds (Nowell-Smith 1972:1)?

He further remarks "Indeed it seems to be more of an atmosphere than a doctrine..." (Nowell-Smith 1971:1, emphasis added).

In the pages to follow I will outline the forms that this "atmosphere" takes while sketching a brief history of its rising from out of the ferment of now distant days. I contend that if we are to understand the nature and actual contribution of this elusive notion within a maturing anthropology we must attempt to see where and how it originated (i.e. from whom) and what its emergence has meant within our gradually changing efforts to render ourselves better understood.

While it goes without saying that the anthropologist has good reason to be appreciative for many of the efforts of philosopher/scrutinizers directed toward informing our very human study of humankind, it must also be noted that throughout history philosophers have often tended to disregard any differentiation between the "pointing finger" and "that which is pointed to". It appears that anthropologists attempt to warn one another about such follies and undergo the "rites of passage" of fieldwork as, amongst other reasons, an exercise in aid of helping us by way of firsthand means to distinguish between the two and to confront the subtle epistemological quandaries arising from the.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CLASSICAL AND PRE-BOASIAN CULTURAL RELATIVITY

Occasionally throughout the remote and pre-modern western European past, the concept of cultural relativity emerged as a useful intellectual device. Usually it involved the application of information obtained through trade or travel that revealed such diversity of existent human life-styles, values, and forms as to provide a persuasive edge when skillfully used within philosophical arguments. It was a favourite ploy of sceptics from Pyrrho in the 4th century B.C. to Michel de Montaigne in the 16th century A.D., as well a constructive feature of the philosophical concepts of Democritus, Epicurus and, centuries later, the ethical relativist, Boethius (Honigmann 1976).

It was not until the first half of the 19th century that a view similar to that held by 20th century anthropological relativists came to be formulated by one Baron Charles De Secondat Montesquieu, a French historian and political writer whose major work, L'Esprit Des Lois (1748), combined both the assertion "one society should not be judged by another's standards" and, ironically (when we consider this in light of anthropology 150 years later), "a classification of three developmental stages of human (pre) history that was to achieve great popularity in the nineteenth century: hunting or savagery, herding or

barbarism and civilization" (Garbarino 1977:14-15; my parenthetic inserts; emphasis in original).

In the early years of its 19th century genesis anthropology reflected to a considerable extent "...the outcome of the doctrines of optimism, the inevitability of progress and the perfectibility of man current in the (preceding) 18th century" (Piggot 1960:20; my parenthetic insert). The early anthropologists were concerned with accounting for the very considerable differences that had been discovered to exist between their own Euro-American societies and the vast array of lifeways of the world's multitudinous peoples. The convergence of factors was such that conditions were ripe for the development and maintenance of the classical evolutionist perspective.

Bolstered, amongst other things, by the European archeological evidence supporting the evolutionary unidirectionality of Thomsen's "Three Age System" of 1832, were such ethnological schemes as Lewis Henry Morgan's 'savagery, barbarism, and civilization' continuum. During this period great pressure had mounted against the work of Charles Darwin concerning bio-evolution. In contrast, public opinion was in support of the evolutionary theory as it was applied by Spencer to explain social development. Tennekes, in reference to the "ethnocentrism" of the "evolutionistic" school summarized it as having "...held its own culture to be the culmination of the development of man and evaluated other cultures as earlier stages" (Tennekes 1973:5).

Johann Christoph Adelung, a late 18th century German scholar, is known to be one of the earliest to use the term Culter (1782). He defined it in an "enumerative" manner, predating that of Tylor's use of the concept 'culture' by nearly a century (Gamst and Norbeck 1976). Amongst several other ideas more than century ahead of their time, Adelung introduced a conception of cultures which has, for modern anthropology during the past fifty years, come to be referred to as cultural relativity.

Noteworthy is the fact that Edward Burnett Tylor, throughout the final quarter of the 19th century and virtually alone amongst his contemporaries, maintained something of a relativistic perspective in his work. Regarding this, Abram Kardiner and Edward Preble note:

Tylor approached his main subject - primitive man - with a sense of cultural relativity unusual for his time. "Measuring other people's corn by one's own bushel," was a cardinal mistake, according to Tylor, and had to be guarded against at all times. And although he is not completely free from censure on this point, he succeeded better than most of his contemporaries (Kardiner and Preble 1961:56).

BOASIAN CULTURAL RELATIVITY

It was as a direct and persuasive antithesis to the ethnocentrically indulgent classical evolutionists and as an empirically derived and grounded insight into the relativity of human

cultures that cultural relativity (re-)emerged as a fresh anthropological attitude implicit in the work of a young Franz Boas.

I have intentionally avoided using the form "relativism" but have used the form "relativity" in referring to the concept at this stage of its development because I believe it is important to note that only later did it begin to be ascribed the stature of a "distinctive doctrine or practice" as implied by the suffix "ism" (Please see this paper's APPENDIX for further information regarding the meaning of the word 'relativity'.)

It was characteristic of Boas that those innovative approaches within anthropology for which he was responsible emerged either as a result of his social criticisms or as a result of his methodological practice or exhortations as much as from any specific theorizing. G.W. Stocking Jr. writes,

In contrast...to the 19th century anthropological tradition, Boas' empiricism was systematically critical, attacking prevailing classificatory and typological assumptions in all areas from a relativistic point of view, both in the methodological and evaluative sense (Stocking 1976:6).

Relativity was no less than a bold new paradigm, in the Kuhnian sense, underlying and expressively enmeshed within the innovative anthropological empiricism advocated by Franz Boas towards the close of the 19th and the opening of the 20th century. As an intellectual rationale it enabled the turn of the century "free thinker" such freedom of thought because it justified the (creative) constellational approach to problem solving and the further generation of knowledge. An unfortunate by product of this relativistic perspective, especially apparent with its adoption and more extreme interpretations towards the end of the second quarter of this century by several of Boas' more prominent students, was the over-emphasis of cultural differences and the neglect of the study of cross-cultural commonalities.

Relativists attempt to realistically impute dimensionality to phenomena in context and are aware of the part that observer perspective (and predisposition) can play in delimiting or extending the range of our knowledge and understanding of it. They do not so much emphasize and value the 'text' of an event, for example, as they do the 'text-in-context'. As regards his particular form of contextualism it is worth noting Seaton and Watson-Gegeo's observation that:

Boas' pluralism is of significance, for he assumes no general chronological sequence for all cultures but rather emphasizes the uniqueness of contexts and the relativity of cultural outcomes in these contexts (1978:198).

EINSTEIN, BOAS, AND RELATIVITY

While Albert Einstein was the more prominent public target of such a renouncement from his country of origin, both he and Franz Boas were, in actuality, sharing the fascist backlash against their ethnicity and their life's work when "...the Jewish theory of relativity was, in Hitler's Germany, officially repudiated (Calder 1979:20).

Einstein and Boas both found truth in the notion that things do look different from different vantage points. The son of Jewish but "...by no mean religious..." parents, Einstein recalled that "(p)hysical assaults and insults were frequent on the way to school though not really malicious. Even so, however, they were enough to confirm, even in a child of my age a vivid feeling of not belonging" (Tauber 1979:199).

In comparison to this it is worthy of note that the scars that Boas bore and casually attributed to high adventure in the Arctic were in actuality dueling scars obtained by him in efforts to defend his dignity against the insults of anti-semites during his early university days in Europe. Kardiner and Preble write: "A freethinker from childhood, Boas received none of the strengths and security that religion can provide, yet he was associated with the Jewish religion by others and persecuted for it" (Kardiner and Preble 1961:122).

Albert Einstein and Franz Boas experienced firsthand, in their respective childhoods, a sense of profound social marginality that may very well have served to provide an early and painful lesson in 'dimensionality', 'perspective', 'context', 'bias', and the inherent dangers, moral or otherwise, that come of the injudicious establishment and application of absolutist criteria in the assessment of anything or anyone. These men, by virtue of their knowledge-led-by-intuition and driven by "a holy curiosity"³, brought us from their understanding of physics⁴ and the ways of humankind closer to a true understanding of the "...connection between the concepts of the dimensionality of the universe, the dimensionality of knowledge, and the dimensionality of culture" (Kuznetsov 1979:173).

The value of the notion of relativity to both theory and methodology in physics and in anthropology was eventually to transform both disciplines. Clyde Kluckhohn noted that in response to a query as to how he had come to discover relativity, Einstein simply said, "By challenging an axiom" (Kluckhohn 1965:244). Einstein had the magic tool of mathematics by which he could harness and give expressive form to the findings of his "Gedankenexperiments"⁵ (i.e. 'thought experiments'), thereby facilitating pristine theoretical development for a science which is practically blind and deaf without it.

In contrast to this, Boas realized that anthropological theory easily fell short of accommodating actuality; that is, of accounting for the facts. As a result he placed strong emphasis on the importance of information retrieval in anthropology. According to the young Franz Boas, one could not generalize until the facts were all obtained. An older Boas came to view 'generalization' as a remote possibility.

ETHICAL RELATIVISM

Ethical relativists maintain that while the same action, for example, may be judged by one individual or group as good and by another as bad, these views are not contradictory because moral "truths" are relative to such other factors as who it is that is making the judgement.

Ethical relativism had its modern origins within budding positivist philosophy and only gradually, primarily towards the end of the 19th century amongst the more cross-culturally informed, did it come to be explicitly considered as stemming from cultural plurality and diversity. This view is best represented by Yale Professor. Dr. William Graham Sumner in his book Folkways, first published in 1906. In this scholarly compendium of rare and exotic facts culled from a vast and assorted array of sources, Sumner asserts that:

All the groups whose mores we consider far inferior to our own are quite as well satisfied with theirs as we are with ours. The goodness or badness of mores consists entirely in their adjustment to the life conditions and the interests of the time and place (Sumner 1940:79 orig. 1906).

The implications of this opinion went virtually unchallenged for more than four decades. It took that long for us to begin to realize and to seriously distinguish between what we now term the 'etic' and the 'emic' perspectives. Eventually we began to consider the grounds for anthropology's acknowledgement and accommodation of both of these as valid and (potentially) co-existent vantage points and approaches.

The philosopher/anthropologist Edward Westermarck, in 1932, published Ethical Relativity. It was Westermarck's contention the ethics stemmed from emotional response and that this, in turn, varied from society to society according to differences in their process(es) of socialization along with the particular circumstances and composition of each. In June of the year of its publication a glowing supportive review of Westermarck's book, written by Boas' student Ruth Benedict, was printed in Books, the New York Herald Tribune's weekly book review.⁶

RADICAL RELATIVISM SURFACES

Ruth Benedict was the first major public proponent and promoter of cultural relativism. She appears to have considered its promotion as something of a 'cause' and was inclined to meld both ethical and cultural relativity into one relativism concept. In 1934 she published her popular work, Patterns of Culture, and it was in the final paragraph of this book that the potency of what had been implicit Boasian cultural relativity came to be, with more than a dash of ethical relativism, explicitly aired.

Social thinking at the present time has no more important task before it than that of taking adequate

account of cultural relativity...The recognition of cultural relativity carries with it its own values, which need not be those of the absolutist philosophies. It challenges customary opinions and causes those who have been bred to them acute discomfort. It rouses pessimism because it contains anything intrinsically difficult. As soon as the new opinion is embraced as a customary belief, it will be another trusted bulwark of the good life.

We shall arrive then at a more realistic social faith, accepting as grounds of hope and as new bases for tolerance the coexisting and equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence" (Benedict 1959:241).

The words of this closing paragraph effervesce with an exciting yet stunningly naive (in light of the revelation of implications in decades to follow) enthusiasm for cultural relativism as a radically liberal prospective panacea for an ailing world.⁷ I cannot help but reflect upon this as having been the result of the "spirit" having been divorced from the "technique" in the sense that spirit and technique were pondered by Edward Sapir 17 years earlier in a letter to Paul Radin when he wrote:

...I simply should like honestly to think out what conceptual basis, if any, there is for anthropology as a distinctive science. Is it not rather a technique and a spirit than concern with a definitely and naturally delimited body of fact? (Sapir 1965:22; orig. 1917).

With Benedict no longer are these enmeshed as they have been in the stance and method evident in the accomplishments of Boas' lifework...like the 'theme' and 'plot' of a gripping novel...as tight and as fitting as the bark on a tree. Influenced by both Sumner's⁸ and Westermarck's books, she makes an effort to promote what appears to be only a distilled 'Geist' of Boas' accomplishments in the form of a radical ideology of cultural relativism.

Cultural relativism developed as an ideology within anthropology epitomizing a certain idealistic fervor amongst several anthropologists during the thirties and forties concerning anthropology's future potential. Conditions, I think, were ripe during this period for relativism to flourish. This was not only due to (1) the predilection towards 'the relative approach' that was the Boasian heritage, but it was also as a result of (2) the pressure brought on due to the exigencies of that bleak period for Euro-American culture (for which anthropology served as something of an escapist's option) combined with the romanticism which persisted and enabled people to persevere the daily hardships of these decades, and last and deservably least, (3) 'relativity' had become a popular buzz-word with the masses due to Einstein's phenomenal rise to fame. Anthropology could only benefit from the excitement with which the words war already charged.

It was out of the kind of anthropology emphasized during the 'Boasian years' that the modern (i.e. 20th century) conception of cultural relativity had its genesis. Anthropology's Boasian years were typified by the "...meticulous data collection in the field and the careful historical investigation of specific societies to determine the presumably unique series of events that lead to each manifestation" (Garbarino 1977:97). Eventually, that which had for so long been part of Boas' attitudes and exhortations was considered by several of his students to warrant articulation. Through them, especially Ruth Benedict and later Melville Herskovits, Boas' original implicit cultural relativity was to become something of a 'patent, commodity that was very popular in the ideological market place up until the end of the Second World War.

During the 'dirty thirties' and the war years of the forties pressures came to bear upon anthropology which were conducive to furthering the emerging notion of 'cultural relativism'. Boasian historical particularism has commonly, in recent decades, been referred to as having been "extremely atomistic", "overly descriptive", "rigid", "leading to theoretical sterility" and the complaint that anthropology was stunted in its progress by the lengthy dominance of what is loosely termed the Boasian "school" occasionally accompanies praise for Boas' contribution to the profession (Garbarino 1977; Bidney 1953). Historical particularism was not altogether satisfying for those whose nomethetic yearnings made them impatient with descriptions and meticulousness.

The hardship of the thirties was accompanied by a romanticism best described by Stocking when he wrote:

Although never really escaping the bounds of its own cultural identity, the romanticist is nonetheless impelled by alienation towards identification with the culturally exotic, seeking to preserve its "otherness" as an affirmation of the possibility of cultural worlds more harmoniously fulfilling of the potencies of the human spirit (Stocking 1976:31).

Cultural relativism was vavoured at this period as the theoretical precipitate of the romanticist ideal. Regarding this romanticism and the exciting possibilities that relativism seemed, until the 1950s and 60s, to promise, Eric Wolf comments that, "...the concept of unlimited human variability, together with the sense that anything was possible and morally feasible, gave many people the feeling that their own lives could be recut upon some other pattern..." (1964:23). This was especially the case in America.

SKELETON KEYS FOR CLOSET RELATIVISTS

Ruth Benedict, in a manuscript written circa 1941-42, and only published posthumously (Mead 1959), remarks that the term "cultural relativity" had passed into common currency amongst those who had no conception of what culture in the anthropological sense meant. She declares that: "...it is this lesson that all things are relative

which the general public has first and foremost learned from anthropology" (in Mead 1959:383).

Benedict did not live to witness the rude awakening that proponents of extreme relativism were to experience in the decades following World War II. Ever since the articulation of the cultural relativism thesis by Melville Herskovits in what David Bidney termed "...its most uncompromising form" (1953:423), philosophers, for whom the topic has proven especially savory, have taken it to task (see Introduction). They have attempted, with considerable success, to render apparent its inherent contradictions and other shortcomings.

These philosophers were not alone. The amorphous "dogma" of cultural relativism, endorsed by reputable ethnographers and zealous doctrinaires alike, began in the late 1940's and early 1950's to fare poorly against keen criticism levied from both professional ranks (e.g. Redfield 1953) and, as well, from a new breed of world-wise, travelled and war awakened students. They came to the lecture halls with a firsthand awareness of what it was like to personally be confronted with the occasionally alarmingly bizarre or the morally unconscionable behaviour of foreign peoples in remote lands. Consequently, they were all the more conscious of (and accordingly respected) the methodological implications that came of cultural relativity. On the other hand, they realized that evaluation in the course of research was inevitable and a wholly neutral attitude was neither always possible nor was it necessarily desirable.

The desire to strictly abide by or to pay lip-service to patent cultural relativism was rapidly waning during the early post-war years while expectations, in light of the reported plight of troubled populations around the world, were being raised for a more patent and effective applied anthropology.

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Ruth Benedict, in her review of his book, referred to Edward Westermarck's persuasive style of argument in Ethical Relativism as the wielding of "...a vast collection of anthropological contradictions..." (1932:6). Benedict's mentor, Franz Boas, is widely reputed to have artfully mastered and much employed the same mode of argument. It was this very technique that many classical sceptics and the early moral relativist Boethius used.

Margaret Mead (1964), between the years 1941 and 1949, discovered and warned that contradicting cross-cultural examples were being used by ethical relativists to argue that all moral practices are ultimately without validity. She saw that cultural relativity was gradually being identified with this philosophically radical and potentially dangerous position.⁹ In light of this, Mead (1964) stressed the fact that fundamental to the anthropological relativist's perspective is the belief that cultural phenomena should be studied and understood in context.

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Proponents of the concept of the relativity of cultures warn of the dangers inherent in the application of the norms of one's own system of belief for the description, explanation or assessment of the ideas, actions, and creations of foreign peoples. Cultural relativity is, I suggest, ultimately grounded in, and its verity stems from the simple fact that, as Morris Opler writes "...any cultural matrix is to some degree historically and organizationally unique" (Opler 1968:563).

David Bidney (1968), Robert Kuttner (1970) and others have supported the claim that, as Swartz and Jordan contend,

However one may feel about cultural relativism as a moral doctrine, it is independent from cultural relativity as an intellectual tool. Using cultural relativity to help understand behaviour need not entail a relativistic moral position any more than it precludes it (Swartz and Jordan 1976:72).¹⁰

In contrast to relativism, I suggest that cultural relativity has proven to be more of a loose collection of historically necessary and important, although on occasion problematic, anthropological principles, attitudes or approaches (or even, as Nowell-Smith suggests, an "atmosphere" -- see Introduction), rather than anything so definite, so seemingly cut and dried or pretentious as a doctrine, a principle or a dogma. It has, I contend, provided anthropology with the theoretical and methodological means whereby it could persistently attempt to maintain disassociation from biases inherent in or derived from its respective cultures and/or belief systems of origin. According to Donald T. Campbell, the relativistic perspective has provided anthropology with "...a tool in the service of a critical approach to a superior objectivity" (in Herskovits 1973:xii).

The difference between the higher profile cultural relativism and what I maintain are the less pretentious, less extreme, more subtly pervasive and enduring underlying principles or cultural relativity becomes apparent when we contrast the cul de sac that dogmatic relativism has come to represent with the degree to which basic relativist concepts remain, nevertheless, alive and deeply entrenched within anthropology]. This is evident from the fact that, as Donald Campbell notes, its proponents "...are either re-inventing it under other labels (emics, ethnoscience, hermeneutics, sociology of knowledge, oppositin to intellectual imperialism and scientific neo-colonialism, etc.) or asserting it without crediting primary sources" (in Herskovits 1973:v).

Given the range of meaning that the word relativity (see APPENDIX) has, it is important to bear in mind that, realistically viewed, we are dealing with much more complex and more deceptively difficult concepts than had, throughout previous decades, been realized. Indeed, the fit between different meanings of relativity and the various forms of cultural relativism is an especially appropriate subject for future

examination. There has been considerable variance between the views of different relativists as to what their positions, attitudes and approaches entail or include. A typology of relativist views and principles should, I believe, include a distinction between concepts which are intra-culturally focused and those which apply more within the cross-cultural domain.

Historically, the relativist's perspective became a most useful instrument for a budding social science grouping for an appropriate "...attitude of...*...neutrality (affective* or otherwise) toward (its) subject matter! (Wolf 1964:23; my parenthetic inserts and transposition (*) of 'affective'). It secured anthropology's progressive transformation from being an instrument of often blatant occidental ethnocentricities towards its having achieved a state of dynamic neutrality (or, as some might prefer to qualify it, pseudo-neutrality).

Eventually this led to our present allocentric (i.e. having the ability to take a multiplicity of perspectives)¹¹ anthropology which embodies or entertains an impressive (is not overwhelming) array of deverse viewpoints and approaches. Rather than seeking an appropriate attitude of neutrality, anthropology is now content to derive its relative non-partisanship from a sincere quest both for insight and the applied benefits thereof.

CONCLUSION

While the notion of cultural relativity has been invaluablely instrumental in originally alerting and eventually serving to remind anthropologists that cultural data must be examined in their proper context and that their own (i.e. the anthropologist's) cultures should be subject to critical and impartial study, it has proven no less valuable as a locus of controversy by which anthropology has benefited in at least two ways: (1) The questions concerning the nature and propriety of relativism have provided anthropology with vital feedback from the philosophers regarding fundamental ethical and epistemological issues in anthropology; and (2) The antagonistic juxtaposition of cultural relativism, on the one hand, and the myriad and often subtle absolutist perspectives on the other, have served to make of anthropology a more reflexive instrument better attuned to doing justice by the facts in actuality, the facts of humankind.

Keesing writes:

Many anthropologists would argue that cultural relativism is not a position one can ultimately live with--but that it is a position we need to pass through in search of a clearer vision. By wandering in a desert of relativism, one can sort the profound from the trivial, examine one's motives and conscience, customs and beliefs. Like all vision quests it can be lonely and dangerous; but it can lead to heightened perceptions of ourselves of what it is to be human, and

of what man could be if he would. In a world where people foist their political dogmas and religious faiths on one another, where modern ideological inquisitions save souls by dispatching them with flame and lead, we sorely need such wisdom (Keesing and Keesing 1971:127).

The purpose of this paper has not been to herald any issue of regret for cultural relativity in anthropology. On the contrary, I have sought by way of tracing briefly its classical and more recent applications or expressions, to begin to rectify any lingering misgivings or misunderstandings that there might be as to its past and current anthropological importance. This paper has attempted to bring into clearer focus the history and significance of the (re)emergence of cultural relativity which led eventually to the formulation and promotion of cultural relativism. While the former has here been distinguished as being inextricably part of the living fabric of anthropology, the latter, now, is no more than the heuristic device of which Keesing (above) writes. Through its ongoing contribution toward the progressive fruition and propagation of anthropological knowledge and understanding, the ultimate justification for cultural relativity in anthropology is gradually being realized.

APPENDIX

The word "relativity" is a noun derived from the verb "relate" by way of the adjective "relative" which, upon examination, may be found to have a number of possible meanings relevant to an understanding of "relativity".

These meanings are:

1. having or expressing connection with, or reference to something.
2. a) not having absolute existence but conditioned (e.g. it is beautiful to me, but beauty is relative to the beholder's eye).
b) having meaning only in connection with or as related to something else (e.g. as large and small are relative terms).
3. comparative; not absolute (e.g. the relative value of two things).

Relativity is defined as:

1. The state or fact of being relative.
2. a) the state or quality of being connected with, or of having reference to something else, especially
b) interdependence, or a state of close dependence on one another, as of the individual and society.
3. Physics, a theory, formulated essentially by Albert Einstein, that matter and energy are equivalent and form the basis for nuclear energy and that space and time are relative rather than absolute concepts.

These definitions are derived and have been combined from The Winston Dictionary: College Edition (1942), the Webster Dictionary (1975) and the Random House Dictionary (1978).

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FOOTNOTES

1. Robert Redfield (1953) seriously questioned whether the neutrality that proponents of cultural relativism expected of anthropologists was either appropriate or possible. Most of his criticism was levied at the prevailing moral relativism component of cultural relativism. Redfield was first amongst anthropologists to point out what Jon Wagner has termed cultural relativism's "logical inconsistency" and 'inhumanity' (Wagner 1979:7). The former refers to an anti-absolutist stance which is itself proposed to be absolutely applied. The latter refers to the actual inhumanity entailed by such a neutrality as promotes silent detachment on the part of anthropologists which such atrocities as systematic genocide are being blatantly committed near and abroad.
2. It is worth bearing in mind that, as Geroge Leonard writes: "A context is not a container. The word comes from the Latin terms con and texere meaning "to weave together". Context, then, is a process of relating, of weaving together." (Leonard 1978:138; emphasis added).
3. These words have been extracted from an admonition attributed to Albert Einstein; "Never lose a holy curiosity" (Source Unknown).
4. Boas, aided by circumstance, exchanged continuing his work in geophysics for anthropological research.
5. The Anglicised plural is intentional.
6. It should be noted that the date of publication for Ruth Benedict's review of Ethical Relativism is incorrectly listed in both Margaret Mead's obituary for her in American Anthropologist, Volume 51, pages 547-68 (i.e. Mead 1949) and in Mead's 1974 book entitled Ruth Benedict. The correct date of the review in the New York Herald Tribune's weekly section Books is June 26, 1932 and not August 6th of that year.
7. It is here worth noting Frank Cunningham's assertion that: "Relativism is no guarantee that a liberal attitude will be taken toward others, and in particular it is no guarantee that tribal thought will not be depreciated in an ethnocentric way, or even obliterated (as in colonial or neo-colonial ventures)" (Cunningham 1979:46).
8. In her manuscript entitled 'Ideologies in the Light of Comparative Data' published posthumously in Mead's An Anthropologist at Work (Mead 1959), Ruth Benedict credits Sumner with positing the generalization which eventually came, according to her understanding, to be termed "cultural relativity".
9. For a much more thorough critique of ethical relativism in anthropology, see Robert E. Kuttner's excellent 1970 article 'Ethical Relativism: The Rise and Ruin of an Anthropological

Dogma'. I agree with most of Kuttner's views and would only add that much of what he refers to as ethical relativism had, during the first half of this century, gradually become synonymous with cultural relativism.

10. I have taken the liberty of substituting 'ity' for the suffix 'ism' twice and have used italics in both instances. This change has been made to highlight a distinction made in this paper while not altering the meaning intended by the author of this quote.
11. 'Allo' is derived from the Greek allos, other: a combining form. Allocentric, in this instance, is the centering of attention and interest upon other peoples, including the taking into account of their respective perspectives on topics or issues.

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