

Class 4: Ethical Relativism

Materials:

- Bring laptop with Nacirema

Goals:

- Encourage the students to question the ways in which we can and cannot reasonably critique a culture, our own or another.
- Have students consider whether there are any universal principles that should consistently govern cultures
- Have students consider their own culture from a third party perspective and understand how framing affects our understanding of other cultures

Timeframe (minutes):

0-15 minutes: Side of the room activity

15-30: Second discussion

30-45: Nacirema discussion

Ground Rules:

- The usual principle of charity spiel
- This is a lesson plan where we will be talking about real-world ideas. We are talking about differences in moral and cultural values and we foresee that certain things could be uncomfortable to listen to or speak about. Please try to be sensitive and feel free to leave if you need at any time during class.

Lesson:

A. Sides of the room activity - Oliver

- a. Move to different sides of the room according to the following prompts:
 - i. You have a curfew
 - ii. You have social media
 - iii. You've been grounded
 - iv. You take off your shoes before you go in the house
 - v. You have assigned chores
- b. QUESTIONS ABOUT ANSWERS (We'll do this for every statement of the five):
 - i. Why do you think you have that restriction or freedom?
 1. I.e. what values are behind them
 - ii. Do you think this policy is reasonable?

- iii. Which side would you prefer to be on? Move to that side
 - 1. Why did you move/stay? Do you think your life will be better/worse on this side?

B. Cultural Relativism Introduction - Anna

a. DEFINITION (Russ Shayfer-Landau):

Cultural relativism instead locates the ultimate standard of morality within each culture's commitments. It says that *an act is morally acceptable just because it is allowed by the guiding ideals of the society in which it is performed, and immoral just because it is forbidden by those ideals.*

Both subjectivists and relativists regard people as the authors of morality. On both of these views, morality is made by and for human beings. Before we were around, nothing was right and wrong. If our species ever becomes extinct, morality will cease to exist. The fundamental difference between these two views is whether each person, or each society, gets to have the final say in ethics.

b. Discussion Questions

- i. Are any of the household values we discussed objectively right?
 - 1. We talked about curfews, social media access, grounding, shoes in house, and chores
 - 2. Can one household criticize another's values?
- ii. At what point does it become important to you that someone's household has the same values as yours?
 - 1. What if your neighbor kills their pet hamster?
 - 2. What if the parents are constantly lying to the children?
 - a. Out of convenience?
 - b. Out of care for the child?
 - c. Out of manipulation?
- iii. Obviously this is mirrored in larger intercultural relations.
 - 1. Can one culture reasonably criticize another?
 - 2. Are there any commonalities among all cultures you know of? If yes, what is a value common to many cultures?
 - 3. What flaws can you see in our own culture? Do you see the same flaws in other cultures?
 - 4. Are there ways that we dictate the culture of multiple countries at once?
 - a. Colonization
 - b. UN policies
 - 5. Similar to the household question, at what point does it become important to you that another nation has the same values as yours?

- a. Is there anything that we would expect to universally be considered wrong that a culture does?
 - i. Killing? (Under what standards)

C. Watch Nacirema video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQpPwge6eeM> - Daisy

1. Stop at 2:20, yellow text. Note that if you are familiar with the Nacirema people, please don't participate in the discussion until others have the chance.
2. Discussion:
 - a. In light of what we've just talked about, what do you think of the Nacirema culture?
 - b. What, if anything, do you find morally wrong or morally right about their traditions?
 - c. What do you think led to their values?
 - d. If discussion isn't flowing, Daisy and Anna can talk about "body fascination" and "magic chests" (medicine cabinets)
3. Explain Nacirema is American spelled backwards
 - a. How did that make you feel? Initial reactions?
 - b. Does this change any of your perceptions on the previous discussions/instincts when you hear of rituals from another culture?
 - c. How might this change the way you compare different cultures? How does framing affect the way we understand cultures?

Feedback:

- What did you like about this lesson? What did you not like?

RESERVE QUESTIONS:

- What if anything makes a culture an authoritative arbiter of morality?
- What if a person is a part of two conflicting cultures?
 - E.g. family says live at home until you're 30 to care for your parents, culture says you have to move out.