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Cultural Relativism



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Cultural Relativism, Rachels

- Different societies have different moral codes
- There is no objective standard that can judge one societal code better than another
- The moral code of our society has no special status
- There is no universal truth in ethics
- A society's moral code is determined of *that* society
- We are arrogant if we try to judge the conduct of other people



Cultures are more than a society

Cultural identifications in all kind of cultures, and on all cultural levels-
define common moral circles

(see Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010)



Critique: C R versus Human Rights

Cultural relativity is an undeniable fact; moral rules and social institutions evidence an astonishing cultural and historical variability. Cultural relativism is a doctrine that holds that (at least some) such variations are exempt from legitimate criticism by outsiders (---). Moral judgements, however, would seem to be essential universal (Donnelly, 1984).

- 1. Is there such a thing like a universal moral or is it not?**
- 2. What is "good" and "bad" with cultural relativism?**



A phenomenological point of view

- Phenomenological thinkers contributed to the dominance of relativistic thinking in the 20th century.
- Husserl's concept of “transcendental subjectivism”: He understood worldviews as cultural formations that come and go”
 - “To the one human civilization there corresponds essentially the one cultural world as the surrounding life-world with its manner of being”



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Ethical challenges of phenomenological approaches



- In 1961 phenomenologist Hannah Arendt followed the trial of A. Eichmann, one of the key figures of the Holocaust.
- Instead of confirming the evil-ness of Eichmann, she was questioning his motivations and blamed him for “thoughtlessness” – talking about the “banality of the evil”. She got heavily criticized for belittlement of the holocaust.



Phenomenology's influence on research methodology

- The subjectivist approach of phenomenology has been taken over by ethnologists/anthropologists.
- Ethnographers are more and more dealing with the life world of an individual or a group instead of focusing on an over-arching idea. This approach has been also coined as “Ethnomethodology” (Garfinkel)
- HCI has taken over this ethnomethodologist approach (cf. i.e. Crabtree)



Differing Cultural Codes: Due to Facts or to Values?

When is there a child? (Ontology)	What can be done? (Morality)
The moment of conception	Abortion and infanticide rejected
At birth	Abortion accepted, infanticide rejected
When awareness of "I"	Infanticide accepted