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Cultural relativism and cultural absolutism

Cultural relativism suffers from two flaws: a logical flaw and a conceptual one. The logical flaw relates to the differentiation between the absolute mind and the relative mind. This means that the assumption of the cultural dependency of science implicitly always presupposes an absolute truth which is independent of culture. The second flaw is the conceptualisation of culture as a kind of cage from which nobody is able to escape. To avoid these two errors and to define relativism without relinquishing the commitment to science, the author presents the concept of “constructive realism” which is able to resolve both these problems.

Kulturele relativisme en kulturele absolutisme

Kulturele relativisme gaan mank aan twee vergissings: 'n logiese en 'n begripsmatige mistasting. Die logiese fout verwys na die differensiasie tussen 'n absolute rede en 'n relatiewe rede. Die implikasie hiervan is dat die aanname van die kulturele afhanklikheid van wetenskap altyd 'n absolute waarheid veronderstel wat onafhanklik van kultuur is. Die tweede fout is om kultuur te konseptualiseer as 'n soort hok waaruit niemand kan ontsnap nie. Met die doel om hierdie twee foute te vermy en om relativisme te definieer sonder om die verbintenis tot wetenskapsbeoefening prys te gee, stel die outeur die begrip van konstruktiewe realisme voor, wat die weg open om albei probleme op te los.

I recently discussed with Japanese colleagues the specific differences between the Japanese and Chinese cultures. I claimed that the most intriguing difference is that assimilation is a typical feature of Chinese culture, making it “strong”. Chinese people approach foreign ideas or experiences positively, taking them up into their own “framework” and hence transforming them into Chinese ideas. As a consequence China has fewer problems with Western culture than other Asian countries. In my view, the development of Japanese culture over the last 150 years reveals a different approach to Western ideas. On the one hand, a group of Japanese intellectuals (perhaps the majority) is convinced that the acceptance of Western science implies the acceptance of Western culture and views westernisation as a positive development. On the other hand, Japanese culture seems to be more secluded and less open than Chinese culture. An extreme example of an open culture would be American culture. Both open and closed cultures obviously come with certain advantages and disadvantages.

Cultural relativism is a type of superficially open-minded behaviour. Every statement is regarded as an opinion and therefore as right, no matter how opposing or contradictory the different “opinions” may be. This way of thinking is definitely liberating and eliminates the otherwise necessary chain of argumentation, but it creates a situation where it is not possible to discuss values — good behaviour, for instance. Cultural relativism also destroys commitment in science. In this article I will focus on the problem of relativism in modern cultural philosophy. My main thesis is that the common concept of relativism is based on both a logical and a conceptual error.

1. Errors in cultural relativism

I shall focus first on the logical error: the cultural relativist claims that propositions depend on culture. Thus propositions offer a culture-specific and hence a relative world-view. This claim seems to convince many people. For example, the American idea of relationships is different from the Japanese, and a gender difference is also involved. Tastes and preferences are also influenced by cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, cultural relativists argue that there is no true knowledge in science because science depends on culture, like everything else.

This claim destroys the commitment of science. Therefore, many philosophers of science, like Popper and his associates (cf Popper 1997), strictly oppose cultural relativism. The Popperian rejection is vehement, because Critical Rationalism is based on the conviction that there is one right world-view. In this view, the conception of science as a cultural product destroys scientific commitment. Popper argues that if cultural relativism were true, many European scientists would be expending a great deal of time and energy on nothing, or at least on doing something that does not lead to truth. This line of thought, however, implies a circularity that is a fundamental logical mistake. The relativist does not claim that science is all wrong, but states that a true world-view is impossible, because of the cultural dependence of every world-view. But this claim presupposes the possibility of a true view in the first place, implying the idea of an “absolute mind”. This idea is a typical European assumption. In opposition to the absolute mind stands humanity, capable only of a “relative view” and thus with a “relative mind”. This is not a common term, but I shall use it in this context for didactic reasons. The question now arises: what is the difference between the absolute and the relative mind? A relativist would probably not discuss this issue, but relativism nevertheless implicitly presupposes the idea of an absolute mind and that there actually is a right view of the world (cf Rorty 1991).

In order to explain my line of thought in more detail I shall refer to Kant's theory of the absolute mind (cf Kant 1992). According to Kant, the absolute mind generates intellectual intuition, meaning the capability of “mental seeing”. Humans do not possess this kind of intuition. Therefore, they develop a more indirect approach to the world by applying scientific methods. The method of trial and error amounts in principle to asking nature questions and interpreting her answers. The absolute mind is able to see the given structure directly, but the relative mind has to reconstruct it. The presupposition of the absolute mind implies the idea of absolute knowledge. At this point, the logical circularity becomes obvious: the argument of relative knowledge is based on the presupposition of absolute knowledge. Cultural relativism implicitly presupposes absolute truth independent of culture, when it claims that knowledge is relative because it depends on culture.

In the common concept of cultural relativism, culture is often conceived as a cage or a prison, or seen in the sense of Plato's famous alle-

gory of the cave (cf Plato 1931). If cultures really had the incarcerating effect described in Plato's cave, and were only able to look in a single direction, to think in certain ways, and could not perceive anything else, then communication with foreigners would be very difficult, because of different and incompatible world-views.

Let us attempt to characterise the cultural influence on science. Chinese culture brought forth traditional Chinese medicine while European science originates in Europe. I recently learned about the existence of Japanese mathematics, a science considerably older than western mathematics. The relation between cultures and their sciences is not strictly deductive. One cannot simply deduce Chinese medicine from Chinese culture. The relation between culture and science is a kind of "guidance". Culture "guides" scientific developments, but also everyday life. Culture functions not only as guidance, but also as a framework and human behaviour differs according to that framework. In European culture, human freedom and individuality are esteemed, resulting in behaviour that seems strange to those raised in the Chinese or Japanese cultures where the family is prioritised, not the individual with his or her freedom. On the other hand, there are behaviour patterns in China and Japan that seem strange to Europeans, as they do not regard the family as most important. This is a good example for explaining the terms framework and guidance. If the framework for social behaviour is family, then the choices made in certain situations will differ from those made within a framework of individual happiness. People who grow up in a culture valuing family ties are often disgusted by people (in extreme cases, some Americans) who care only about their personal happiness. These are typical everyday examples of prejudice between cultures. But there is no right or wrong. When considering behaviour, there are only different views. There is no single right view in ontology either, as I shall show in the discussion which follows.

But what is the relativist's conceptual mistake in respect to aspects of culture? Human beings are able to think on more than one level, of doubting and questioning. For example, every Japanese is able to question his/her values and to ask whether the focus on family ties is actually important for his/her personal life. I do not claim that doubt is a very frequent phenomenon, but at the very least human beings are capable of reflecting upon their cultural framework. Usually, human beings

simply live within the framework, but they may also turn it into an object of reflection and analyse it on this objective level. Many actions in everyday life are guided by culture, functioning automatically without our having to think about them. But there are also situations that make it necessary to focus on the guiding framework.

Therefore, the conceptual mistake made in cultural relativism is a deep misunderstanding of culture. Culture is neither a prison nor a cave, but a guiding structure. It is impossible to understand a culture completely. Even if one were able to reconstruct all of Chinese behaviour or all aspects of Chinese science, one would still not understand these completely, because a complete understanding of Chinese culture implies acting in Chinese ways. Having to reconstruct cultural aspects is never the same as simply living them.

2. Redefining the consequences of cultural relativism

Having discussed these two important mistakes of cultural relativism, we must finally ask how to overcome the negative consequences of relativism. In the 1970s and the 1980s a highly emotional debate about relativism in philosophy and the philosophy of science arose in Europe. Arguments against relativism were posed at conferences and discussed in the literature, but the problems were not solved. Historical fact proves that cultures are basic to science, but no fact proves that science is culture-free (cf Wallner & Agnese 1997). Thus there is some truth in cultural relativism, but we must reconsider the line of thought in order to avoid its devastating consequences. It is obviously correct that science is based on culture. The idea that science is a product of pure rationality and thus free of cultural implications is a naturalistic mistake. Naturalism, usually opposed to relativism, explains human nature by the application of insights formulated in the natural sciences. In a naturalistic approach, science is explained by referring to the basic conditions, meaning the biological substratum of reason, *ie* the human brain. This reductionist attempt to explain science is inadequate and destructive. Neither of the two extremes is able to offer a solution.

First, we must accept the fact that different cultures produce different sciences. The most impressive example, in my view, is the comparison of medical systems and their concepts. There are at least four

different concepts of medicine: Western medicine, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Tibetan medicine and Ayurveda. They propound structurings and understandings of the body which differ in both detail and procedure. It is nonsense to claim that one of these systems is right and the others wrong. This brings us to the next problem arising from relativism: truth becomes relative. This idea turns scientific knowledge into a kind of fiction which tries to convince us of its absolute truth. Apart from the contradictory nature of this claim, we have already seen that absolute truth is not possible.

There is also a mistake in the concept of truth. According to Wittgenstein it is necessary to scrutinise the everyday use of the term “truth” (cf Wittgenstein 1984). Accordingly then, “truth” is always used in a specific context. If somebody tells me that he was at the cinema, it will be easy to decide whether he is lying or not, because the context is clear. I know what a cinema is, and I know what it means to go to the cinema. I will judge the statement as untruthful, if the person simply goes in and out of the movie-house without watching a film. We have no problem with “truth” in its everyday use. The problem arises when we apply the term to absolute situations or assumptions. The claim that a certain scientific law is true in every possible world causes the problems to emerge, because the meaning of “every possible world” remains unclear. Therefore, the context becomes unclear because we are unable to observe every possible world. Hence, if the term “truth” is separated from its context, a linguistic mistake arises. We must be aware that truth remains a local concept. There are local concepts in physics as well as in the use of language (cf Quine 2003). The concept of local truth hints at the fact that language depends on its context and that separation of a term from its context causes it to malfunction.

The clue to resolving this problem is to regain the sciences’ localities and to re-contextualise scientific truth. And since there are no philosophical tools to do so, I have developed a method called *strangification* (cf Wallner 1992). This is an artificial term derived from the English term “astrangification”. Strangification is a method for revealing the presuppositions of a scientific concept or argument. This is done by removing the concept or argument from its original context and placing it in a different context. In this new context the sense of the concept or argument is then formulated. As can be imagined, this causes mis-

understandings and absurdities to emerge, showing the implicit knowledge and presuppositions of the original context. Traditional Chinese medicine's argument that there is heat in the liver, for instance, is perplexing to Western medicine as the temperature of the liver cannot be measured. This reveals the Western presumption that theories must be based on measurable entities.

The following example analyses the implicit ideas about life and world-views of youngsters aged six to ten. An elementary school class was given a mathematical problem to solve. Seven people can build a house in 38 days and five hours. How long would it take 20 workers to build? Little Max was a very clever and diligent student, and he wondered how long it would take one thousand workers, one million workers, or even ten million workers, and calculated the time taken for each. At the end he reached the level of seconds and fractions of seconds. As he presented his results to the class, his classmates laughed. Little Max was very confused, because he had not made a mathematical mistake, so he asked the teacher why his classmates had laughed. If the teacher were a philosopher, then he would have answered:

If we apply mathematics to social behaviour, then we change the context and must be aware of this before drawing conclusions. What happened, was that you reduced the workers' behavioural functions to quantity without taking other behavioural aspects like physical limits or social conflicts into account.

This simple example of strangification shows the limitations of quantification, when mathematics is applied to a social context.

Strangification can also be applied to scientific constructs in order to reveal their cultural dependency. Revealing cultural dependency implies revealing the locality of scientific truth. In this way the term "truth" is preserved, but the illusion of an absolute truth is relinquished as "truth" is placed in context. Revealing the context of the specific truth of scientific products also preserves scientific commitment.

Constructive realism clearly differs from cultural relativism or post-modernism, because of the preservation of truth and commitment, despite the acknowledgement of cultural dependence (cf Slunecko 1997). At the other end of the theoretical spectrum, there is a kind of cultural absolutism presupposing and looking for culturally independent factors. Cultural absolutism preserves scientific commitment by referring to

universality. Hillary Putnam (1986) supports the line of thought that there are some culturally independent factors. In logic, for example, there is the principle of contradiction: it is impossible to judge two contradictory sentences to be simultaneously true. The principle of contradiction may be a universal truth, because it is valid in every culture. I doubt, though, that the principle of contradiction is actually culturally independent. The Chinese and European understanding and use of this principle, for example — and of principles in general — are totally different. But even if there are basic principles insusceptible to cultural aspects, the question is how to explain a complex system like science by reducing it to basic principles. This logical mistake has been made by philosophers.

My position clearly acknowledges the cultural dependency of science. To doubt this would be to fly in the face of the facts. But the consequences of cultural relativism must also be faced. A culture-dependent conception of science does not have to relinquish commitment to science. It is the core idea of constructive realism that cultural dependence and the commitment to scientific proposition systems go hand-in-hand. Constructivism which represents a new position is not a type of reductionism in respect to science that applies to both cultural relativism and cultural absolutism. Cultural relativism is reductive because it reduces the commitment of science; cultural absolutism is reductive because it reduces science to certain allegedly basic principles. Looking for common principles in western and Chinese medicine leads to a misunderstanding of both systems. Furthermore, western medicine runs the risk of destroying foreign medicines by separating specific features from their contexts. A new understanding of science emerges by means of the conjunction of cultural dependency and the commitment to scientific propositions. This position changes the understanding of science in relation to scientific proposition systems and the function of scientific ontology, as well as methodology.

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