PHILOSOPHY & ETHICS

Martin Cohen

Hodder Arnold

A MEMBER OF THE HODDER HEADLINE GROUP
Frankfurt before the Second World War, and hence sometimes dubbed 'the Frankfurt School'. Exponents include Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and, later, Jurgen Habermas. But what is the theory? It is that modern society is governed by administrators following a narrow and damaging creed of 'technological rationality'. To counter this, we need to consider moral, political and even religious values. But where is the Marxism in this? Only in the aim of the critical theorist not to 'interpret the world', but to 'change it'.

CRITICAL THINKING, INFORMAL LOGIC

Critical thinking is concerned with the nature of ARGUMENTS; their structure, 'validity' and also their effectiveness. An argument can be logically 'invalid' but still effective. Critical thinking sees claims and arguments as part of a 'web of intercourse', which may involve partially competed and implied lines of reasoning, shared and hidden assumptions, vagueness, rhetorical devices and, of course, FALLACIES.

CULTURE

Essentials of culture

Not only does 'culture' itself often mean different things to different people, the word 'culture' also often means different things to different people. In anthropology, culture is often intended as the patterns of behaviour and thinking that people living in social groups learn, create and share. Culture also defines groups or societies. A group of people who share a common culture (common beliefs, rules of behaviour, language, some form of social organisation) constitutes a society. Two aspects of the relationship between culture and ethics are whether ethics are relative to time and space and the ethical and policy questions of whether 'culture' ought to be protected.

Culture and ethical relativism

Traditionally, moral theories have considered moral agents as impartial actors, that is, building upon the premise that the moral agent ought to be impartial. By contrast, cultural relativism is the view that what is good or bad, or right or wrong, varies from society to society. The question of ethical RELATIVISM boils down to the question of whether the moral agent is impartial, or whether culture may inform the notion of moral agency.

Examples of cross-cultural moral judgements include the Western horror at the practice of female genital mutilation: one of its forms, infibulation, which is carried out in several African countries and in a few countries in the Middle East, with shards of glass and other unsanitary tools, can cause infections which may eventually result in death. Europeans reject the death penalty, yet it is widely used in both China and the USA. Several indigenous groups criticise the patenting of DNA and any forms of human life, based on the notion that DNA is a collective good that cannot be the subject of exclusive appropriation, while in Western countries patenting life forms is permissible both legally and morally. And abortion is legal in Canada, the USA and parts of Western Europe, but it is illegal in the majority of Latin American countries and in some EU countries (Ireland, Poland, Malta, Cyprus and Portugal). Cross-cultural judgements are also frequent with multicultural societies, in which minorities often decide to withdraw from the majority society and preserve their way of life. The question then becomes how society is going to cope with cultural practices that can conflict with the moral beliefs of the majority and, perhaps, national laws and regulations. For instance, in the USA, the Amish community's practice of having no lights on their vehicles conflicts with state law, not to mention other road users, while the tradition of Acorna Pueblo, a Native American tribe, of using eagle feathers in ceremonial conflicts with federal laws protecting bald eagles as an endangered species.

In the last 30 years, prominent scholars have argued that recognising cultural difference does not equate to ethical relativism, and that moral theory and cultural variations may be reconciled in advocating a political LIBERALISM within the HUMAN RIGHTS framework. Pluralism rejects the ideal of impartiality and seeks to preserve and strengthen group identity by including group differences in public reasoning. In its essence, this position – supported by contemporary philosophers such as Iris Young and Michael Walzer – claims that minorities and its members should be given individual and group rights that will enable them to develop and pursue a life plan that is consistent with their cultural values. Having your own culture is important for achieving this goal. However, certain cultural values are expressed by minority groups which, without protection (by the simple
Several international organisations have recognised the need to protect the culture of minorities. Among them, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) grants respect for cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue as one of the ‘surest guarantees of development and peace’. To this end, UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity defines culture as the ‘set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, values, systems, traditions and beliefs’. Traditional cultural expressions are considered to be part of cultural heritage and identity, and their protection and preservation are linked to the promotion of cultural diversity and human creativity.

The World Intellectual Property Organisation is active in addressing the issue of protection of traditional knowledge. However, the appropriation of local knowledge within the framework of existing global intellectual property rules is a major issue of contention today. A growing number of scholars and international organisations stress that local knowledge – and in particular folklore and indigenous culture – must be protected, and that governments have an ethical obligation to prevent developed countries from destroying local cultures. And recently, people have come to realise that indigenous and local cultures often transfer information that is beneficial outside the region where such culture is present, as in the case of crops that are developed from observing traditional practitioners using local medicinal plants to satisfy the health care needs of the population.

REALITY OF SHEER NUMBERS

When the United Nations tried to agree a set of ‘HUMAN RIGHTS’ for its Declaration, it found it impossible to reach a complete consensus. The Saudis expressed the doubts of many other countries by objecting to the inclusion of women’s rights and ‘freedom of religion’. They thought these were not ‘universal’, or ‘natural’, and claimed instead the authority of customary practice. Certainly customs and ‘rights’ often tell a different story. The SOPHISTS (fifth century BCE) presented the opposition as between physis, nature, and nomos, law or custom, and it is hard sometimes to know which one is worse.

Herodotus famously described his tour of the Mediterranean region in which he contrasted different customs, concluding that it was impossible to prefer one system over another. Perhaps Herodotus’ most famous story is of the Massagetae, who boiled their old folk with beef, and ate the mixture as a treat, but there are many other equally strange stories. One tribe in Niger were said to kill their old people, smoke and pulverise the bodies, and then compress the powder into little balls with corn and water. These little burgers were kept for long periods as a basic food. Some would rationalise this today by saying that it reflected the cruel necessity of life in harsh conditions, perhaps citing stories of the Inuit of support in the theory (like the Hudson Bay Inuit, who strangled the old), or the Tupis (of Brazil, who killed any elderly person who became ill, and then ate the corpse), or the Tobas (of Paraguay, who were reputed to bury their old folk alive). However, these customs were never universal – some tribes had found other solutions. American Indian tribes like the Poncas and Omahas, as well as some Incas, created a role for the old and infirm by leaving tl while the rest of th The old watched th birds.

CYNICS AND CULTURE

Essential Cynicism

What is Cynicism? Cynics believe that respect for human rights is a moral concept that has cross-cultural validity.

Contributor: Andrea Boggio

Further reading

Arnold, M. (1869) *Culture and Anarchy*

CUSTOMS

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A way of life

Cynicism may have been an associate of SOCI Xenophon’s *Symposi* book devoted to t LAERTIUS. But it is Antisthenes who gives respect, the first Cy OF SINOPE, better the Cynic.

At the heart of t oped by Diogenes of Alexandria to the Sophists at Athens, it were as easy to retain rubbing his belly. Dio have sexual intercourse with Hipparchia.