

## An Analysis of the Myth of Cultural Equivalence

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In the spirit of Charles Sanders Peirce, one should begin where one is, not that one has much choice in the matter. On the other hand, one need not stay where one is. Accordingly, we shall begin with the notion that we, the generic “we,” know what we are talking about, namely, that we have some clear idea of cultures, and what it might be for cultures to be equivalent or not equivalent, and that the issue is a factual one, namely, whether cultures are or are not equivalent.

Assuming that all this makes sense, it would seem pretty obvious that cultures are not equivalent. For example, three major argument lines would tend to that likelihood, the Probabilities Argument, the Internal-Division Argument, and the Change Argument. These arguments might be sketched out as follows.

### The Probabilities Argument

Consider a small world containing three cultures, rather than the five thousand or so cultures that anthropology suggests have dotted or still dot the “culture map.” In any event, there have presumably been, or are, at least three cultures on the planet in question, ours, and that is all we need for our argument.

$C_1$   
 $C_2$   
 $C_3$

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Since we have three independently identifiable cultures here, they are obviously different. This suggests, but does not imply, nonequivalence. For example, one supposes no two leaves, snowflakes, or strawberries are the same, i.e., identical, but identity is not required for equivalence. Presumably the leaves, the snowflakes, the strawberries, are similar enough to count as “equivalent,” at least broadly. Along these lines, our three cultures, all being cultures, would be trivially “equivalent,” rather as Model T’s and Ferraris are automobiles. On the other hand, the advocate of cultural equivalence presumably has something more in mind than a common property. For example, grasshoppers and copies of Shakespearean sonnets have a common property, say, some of them being found in Kansas, but this does not make them equivalent in any interesting sense.

The claim that our three cultures,  $C_1$ ,  $C_2$ , and  $C_3$ , are “equivalent,” assuming that it makes sense, would presumably mean that they are similarly valuable, similarly worthy of respect, similarly worthy of estimation, or such. Someone or something, obviously, must be making such judgments. Either these judgments are individual judgments or there is a *Gegenüber*, an external factuality, that is at issue. This is the difference between, say, it looks like the board is three-feet long and the board is three-feet long. In the case of the board, there is an obvious external factuality that is amenable to tape measures and yardsticks. Without denying the possibility of an external factuality in the culture case, its worth, or value, clearly the factuality, if it exists, is one beyond tape measures and yardsticks. What if, say, the board does not look three feet long to someone, but, say, two feet long or four feet long or he does not see the board and may not be sure there is a board at all?

One obviously needs a criterion for equivalence. And, whatever the criterion of equivalence might be, if it is nontrivial, it would seem improbable that  $C_1$ ,  $C_2$ , and  $C_3$  would be equivalent. Let us take some possible axiological criteria, for example, health, happiness, morality, prosperity, freedom, artistic merit, scientific knowledge, and such. It would be highly improbable that any two cultures, let alone three or four or five thousand, would be equivalent on any one of these criteria, let alone on a number of such criteria. This is the probabilities argument. Assuming there are external factualities involved, ascertainable, measurable, and such, it seems, *prima facie*, unlikely that cultures would be equivalent. One or

another would presumably be superior, or rationally preferable, to others, given the concession that content could be accorded to the notion of cultural equivalence, on one or another criterion.

It is simply very improbable that cultures, in any interesting sense, could be equivalent.

### **The Internal-Division Argument**

Every culture, it seems likely, would have its dissidents, implicit or explicit, its internal critics, those who wish the culture were different, were more, say, to their liking. If this is the case, then the culture is not even equivalent to itself, or, better, is not a single unit that might be intelligently compared with other units. If the individuals within a culture are at odds with one another, and disagree on the value of their own culture, and such, then there is no single culture for the outsider to accord equivalence to his own. Is the outsider to regard two warring internal cultures as equivalent, either with one another, or to his own? If so, the partisans within the divided culture would hardly agree with him.

### **The Change Argument**

Let us consider Culture  $C_1$  at time  $t_1$  and the same culture,  $C_1$ , at time  $t_2$ . The culture-equivalence argument would require that  $C_1$  at time  $t_1$  and  $C_1$  at time  $t_2$  are equivalent. That would seem unlikely, either from the point of view of  $C_1$  or from that of outsiders. The culture may have changed. To claim, for example, that a culture of widespread ignorance and poverty, of tyranny and oppression, of subdued and dispossessed populations, of cruelty, of indiscriminate slaughter, of gladiatorial games, of scourging, of frequent, public crucifixions, and such, is equivalent to, say, that of contemporary Italy would seem surprising at least.

In the light of these three arguments, some obvious questions suggest themselves. For example, does anyone really believe that cultures are equivalent; indeed, *could* anyone believe it? For example, those who proclaim such things usually seem rather critical of their own culture, whereas, according to their own premises, they should be as tolerant of their own culture as of any other culture, there being nothing to choose from

between cultures, and all cultures being deserving of esteem, or, at least, respect, which suggests they do not subscribe to their own major premise. To be sure, in these matters, as in subjectivism, relativism, radical skepticism, and such, one often encounters paradoxes, or peculiarities, not uncommon amongst those who find consistency a nuisance, a weapon of class warfare, or an oppressor-driven hoax. To be sure, there is little that cannot be accomplished when one grants oneself exemptions from the annoyances of logic.

The question would remain, though it is not philosophical, why, in spite of the apparent evidence to the contrary, one would wish to believe that cultures are equivalent? One of the most interesting conjectures I have come across with respect to that sort of question is owed to Ayn Rand, who speculated that he who issues moral blank checks hopes to receive one in return. Bigots, fanatics, lunatics, and murderers, on the other hand, are seldom cooperative.

It seems likely, however, that more is involved.

We shall speculate on that later.

But let us suppose, for now, that the proponent of cultural equivalence believes in cultural equivalence, or, at least, more likely, believes honestly that he should believe in it, which will do. His motivation, obviously, whatever it might be, is irrelevant.

Before proceeding, some attention might be devoted to two apparent consequences of the culture-equivalence claim. First, it seems the proponent of this claim should not object to criticisms of his own culture by those of other cultures, however misplaced, absurd, or false such criticisms might be. They are, of course, parts of the other culture, their way of doing things, and such. A second consequence, seldom observed, but earlier suggested, would seem to be that the inhabitant of his own culture should refrain from a criticism of his own culture, as all cultures are morally equivalent, so to speak. If it is wrong to criticize any culture, it follows, by universal instantiation (logic again), that it is wrong to criticize one's own culture, no matter how disgusting, vicious, unjust, and generally horrible it might be. To be sure, our culture-equivalence proponent is unlikely to buy this. Thus, he is committed to a lack of moral symmetry in such matters, not that that is likely to worry him.

A related point here might be termed the "Immigration Paradox." Let us suppose that an individual is permitted to criticize his own culture but not

that of someone else; thus, if the individual in say, Culture  $C_1$  is not permitted to criticize Culture  $C_2$ , but someone within  $C_2$  is permitted to criticize  $C_2$ , it being perhaps part of his culture to do so, then, if the individual in question immigrates from  $C_1$  into  $C_2$ , he may then criticize  $C_2$ , which makes the entitlement to criticize a function not of reality, say, of the same facts and the same individual, but one of geographical location, so to speak. This is the Immigration Paradox.

In passing, we might also note that if all cultures are equivalent, with the result that it is inappropriate to criticize another culture, then, by parity of reasoning, all cultures being equivalent, it seems that it should also be inappropriate to recommend, approve, praise, or commend another culture. But this would defuse one of the major weapons of the cultural-equivalence enthusiast, which is to undermine and subvert his own culture, in the interests of its eventual revision in light of his own designs. Here, one again encounters an instance of the lack of moral symmetry.

So far, we have conceded that content could be accorded to the notion of cultural equivalence, at least on one or another criterion. Whereas this is not an obviously false view, it is one that merits a closer look. We are not dealing, obviously, with the weight of rocks, the length of boards, the location of trees, and such. The claim of cultural equivalence, while not unrelated to reality, while not arrant nonsense, is, at best, obscure. For example, what is to be understood by “culture”? How might that term be helpfully explicated? It is easy to think words, but, if one wishes to think things, as Justice Holmes once suggested, what things does one think? Presumably everything that happens in a given place at a given time is not culture, but what is and what is not? Perhaps it is a “blanket term,” a term that covers many things and explains or illuminates few of them. Perhaps the word, as many words, is blessed with a beneficent vagueness. Perhaps “culture” is one of those concepts we all understand, until we stop to think about it. Perhaps it is best just to stick with the words. In any event, it seems hardy, if not risky, to predicate equivalence of entities that might, under examination, turn out to be little more than pragmatic utilities, heuristic suppositions, anthropological conveniences, simplifying and enabling fictions.

More problematical, in my view, is the metaphorical use of “equivalence.” “Equivalence” has clear, ascertainable meaning in a variety of contexts,

mathematical and logical. For example, the following locutions, or their legitimate substitution instances, would represent equivalences:

$$\begin{aligned} (2 + 2) &= (1 + 3) \\ (p \supset q) &\equiv (\sim q \supset \sim p) \\ [p \supset (q \supset p)] &\equiv [p \supset (\sim p \supset q)] \\ (p \& \sim p) &\equiv (q \& \sim q) \\ \sim (p \& \sim p) &\equiv (q \supset q) \\ p &\equiv [p \vee (p \& q)] \\ \sim (\exists x) Fx &\equiv (x) \sim Fx, \text{ etc.}^1 \end{aligned}$$

I find the notion of cultural equivalence anthropologically dubious, if not unintelligible. If such a claim is intended to be factual, putting aside the difficulties of characterizing what the entities are that are supposed to be equivalent, namely, cultures, its proponents owe us a methodology by means of which such an equivalence, or its absence, might be empirically determined, namely, an empirical test, or tests, by means of which their claim, if it is a genuine factual claim, a genuine hypothesis, might be established, or refuted. There are familiar criteria in the light of which empirical hypotheses are usually evaluated, such as precision, clarity, testability, simplicity, fruitfulness, scope, and conservatism. As nearly as I can tell, the cultural-equivalence claim not only fares badly under such scrutiny, but, in all likelihood, does not constitute a genuine empirical hypothesis at all.

If this conclusion is warranted, and the putative claim is not a claim, or, if a claim, is obviously false or meaningless, one must cast about for an alternative explanation for the motivation or agenda in question. In other words, more may be going on than meets the eye.

It is a common propagandistic, or rhetorical, ploy to conceal a recommendation, prescription, plea, exhortation, command, caution, invitation, threat, or such, in the costume of a declarative sentence, which is the normal vehicle for stating facts, or alleged facts. It seems possible that that is what is involved in claims of cultural equivalence, which seem to be factual claims,

<sup>1</sup>Two locutions are equivalent, logically or mathematically equivalent, if and only if, of logical necessity, i.e., in virtue of their meaning, they must have the same truth value. Alternatively, they are logically or mathematically equivalent if and only if they are interdeducible, namely, each implies the other. One commonly speaks of schemas being equivalent, as in the logical examples above, but, strictly, it would be their appropriate instantiations that would be equivalent. Similarly, in math, as above, the tokens of numbers would not strictly be equivalent, but the types, the numbers themselves. The nature of numbers themselves remains a matter of philosophical controversy.

true or false, but which, under modest inspection, seem to dematerialize, at least for the most part, into interesting but obscure untestable gibberish. In such a case, rather than consign earnestly brandished locutions into the rubbish bin of vacuous pseudo-statements, one might attempt to scout out a likely agenda, some purpose that such locutions might be intended to serve. And, one suspects, such an agenda, or purpose, might be evident once the wizard's pompous and dramatic curtain is drawn aside.

*Cui bono?*

Who is to profit?

If one's hope is to "grasp the sorry scheme of things entire, shatter it to bits, and remold it nearer the heart's desire,"<sup>2</sup> then serious action seems in order. Certainly Marx's recommendation for instrumentalizing scholarship to promote a social or political agenda, as stated in his "Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach," would seem relevant. Sometimes I wonder if the average everyday scholar understands what his committed, agenda-driven, activist colleague may have in mind. If he understands it, which he might, it seems reasonably clear that the public, the community, does not. The fellow who is taking a stab at objectivity and the one who is taking a stab at power are not playing the same game. The victory in one game is understanding, that in the other is ruling.

It is important in such matters, if inconsistent, to seize the moral high ground. Who does not wish to pretend that he alone occupies so estimable an elevation? Certainly our cultural-equivalence enthusiast, however paradoxically, thinks himself at the moral summit, as have an indefinite number of others before him, propounding incompatible positions or postures. For example, tolerance is supposedly a virtue and judgmentality a vice. It is interesting that those who seem most vociferous in the proclamation of such value judgments are usually those who seem most intolerant and most judgmental. To be sure, moral consistency, in a complex and troubled world, is a great deal to ask of anyone, but, more importantly, what is at issue is not the consistency or character of proponents of cultural equivalence but what they are claiming, or, perhaps better, what they are about.

<sup>2</sup>*Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, "LXXIII":

Ah, Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire  
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,  
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then  
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!

Is tolerance a virtue, really?

That would seem to be a question of particularities, repercussions, and futures. Circumstances alter cases, to coin a phrase. Sometimes it is said that one should be tolerant of everything except intolerance, but that is surely too narrow a view, as it would countenance being tolerant of beating children, torturing small animals, embezzlement, littering, car theft, adulterating food, distributing dangerous drugs, and such. The question is, at least for rational minds, not tolerance or not, but tolerance of what, and why, and for how long, and such.

Similarly, is it wrong to be judgmental?

I hope not, because judgment, in a self-governing creature, one who must daily, and constantly, with an eye to repercussions and the future, decide his actions, is inevitable. I have no objection to being nonjudgmental where, say, miniskirts and beach volleyball are concerned, but I would not like to adopt a moral principle that would inveigh against my preferring, say, Yogi Berra or H.G. Wells to, say, Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin. Once again, it would be a question of what judgment, and its nature, and its consequences.

All this talk about tolerance and nonjudgmentality feeds into, and is intended to support, the cultural-equivalence stance, whose purport, presumably, is to undermine ideas, values, and institutions that, without allegiance and affection, and defense, are likely casualties in culture wars, wars many do not even realize are being waged. The battle is largely for the minds of the young, impressionable, idealistic, uncritical, and predisposed to believe what they are taught, at least until it breaks apart against the rocks of reality.

Two steps would seem to be involved in these matters; the first is to discredit a society, an *ethos*, a world vision, or such, and the second is to revise it. I would guess that the position of cultural equivalence is a contribution to the first step. If one's own culture, say,  $C_1$ , is in no way superior to, or preferable to, say, a culture that worships idols, eats people, drinks blood, and sacrifices virgins, then that would seem a serious mark against one's own culture. It is not nearly as special, or worth preserving, as one might have thought. Then, into this spiritual vacuum step the cognoscenti, the leaders, the knowers, the unhappy ones, the disappointed ones, the frustrated, the power-hungry, who luckily have on hand the answers.

Much here, of course, depends on whether or not moral stances are rationally defensible, whether moral claims have truth values, whether some



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policies and practices are better than others, really, and so on. If morality is, so to speak, a crock, then there is, in a sense, a true equivalence of cultures. Each would be as arbitrary, accidental, stupid, and pointless as any other.

But I think very few human beings really believe that, which is interesting, and perhaps significant.

But entering into such issues is another venture.