The Difficulty of Relativism

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Abstract: Relativism has always been a difficult problem. This paper first analyzes the development of relativism currently; Then I illustrate the fundamental impact of relativism on rationality, as well as the various positions and general argumentation structure of relativism in this context; Finally, I analyze the problem of relativism argument, and advocate a broad linguistic relativity that does not lead to typical relativism.

1. Introduction

In the field of contemporary social science philosophy, Mark Risjord believes that there are three special themes: normalization, naturalism, and reduction. In the topic of normalization, the main problems are value and objectivity. In the topic of naturalism, the main problem is the relationship between social science and natural science. In the topic of reduction, the main issue is whether social science objects can be reduced to individuals, or even to the possibility of psychology, physiology, etc. [1]. The debate over naturalism and interpretation runs through the methodology of social science. American philosopher Donald Davidson's radical interpretation and Quine's radical translation theory has great influence on the understanding and interpretation of behavioral meaning. The "uncertainty of translation" proposed by Quine not only affects the general interpretation of anthropology and social sciences, but also has an important impact on the typical cultural relativism. If Quinn is correct, then two translators could produce two different "dictionaries", and each one compatible with everything said by a speaker of a foreign language. In the field of social culture, it means that there is no independent evaluation standard between different social conventions, which is a typical cultural relativism.

At the same time, the "paradigm" and "incommensurability" put forward by Kuhn contributed to the trend of thought of relativism. For example, the meaning of a word and what it refers to cannot be determined in a separate way. Different languages have different background theories and presupposes different realities. For example, "in the language of traditional Chinese medicine, 'You suffer from excessive internal heat' is meaningful, but 'You lack vitamins' is meaningless. But in the language of Western medicine, 'You suffer from excessive internal heat' doesn't make sense. 'You lack vitamins' does." [2]

Relativism leads to a serious problem, "the tolerance problem". The tolerance problem is said that our judgments and guidance are arrogant to different cultures (including other societies, other paradigms, other communities, etc.) and we should be tolerant of different cultures. The issue of tolerance is one of the most criticized aspects of relativism. This is another expression of classic "folk relativism", which rejects criticism of other cultures and is too conservative in its self-criticism. "Anything goes" becomes a conclusion naturally, implying that there is no common or general basis and that everyone can do or believe what they want. What is more, it leads to an all-embracing nihilism [3].

Human history is full of anti-humane cultural's positions and ideas, such as anti-Semitism, slavery, restrictions on women's rights, and so on. More recently, it was only decades ago that Alan Mathison Turing Alan died for being gay. These may seem implausible today, and in the light of common sense, the progress of cultural and social institutions is obvious, but we cannot stop there. We need to defend them philosophically.

2. Three levels of rationality

As far back as the fifth century BC when Herodotus traveled, he found that the Galatians and the Greeks have very different attitudes toward their dead fathers: the former thought eating as a way of honoring the deceased, the latter thought burning as. Both sides consider the other's actions being an insult to the dead and incomprehensible. Herodotus offered a metaphor for this: custom is king. The dispute over customs is the dispute between Kings, which means that nothing can be above customs as the evaluation criteria for different customs [4]. Different cultures have different moral rules. This descriptive relativism is an empirical and methodological position adopted by social anthropologists, from polygamy to cannibalism, from witchcraft to science, finding differences in the worldviews of individuals and groups. Descriptive relativism is often used as a starting point for philosophical debates about relativism in general and cultural relativism in particular. There was no lack of sympathy for relativism. In the mid-20th century, ethnographers and social anthropologists took the principle of cultural relativism as anthropological orthodoxy: judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual according to his own culture. Ethnological data prove that our knowledge and emotions are the result of our social life form and our culture and history [5]. In the field of philosophy, the work of Quine, early Kuhn and Feyerabend objectively deepened the relativism problem. Defenders see it as a forerunner of tolerance, with Paul Feyerabend even arguing that discussions of relativism often appeal to emotion as the domain of argument. Relativism is under attack not because people find it wrong, but because people fear it [6]. Kuhn makes it clear that he and Feyerabend are not Allies, and later Kuhn tries to defend rationality against relativism. In terms of rationality, Simon once divided rationality into three levels to respond to relativism [7]. These three levels of rationality serve as a basis for the rest of this article.

The first level: rationality of individual actions.

The second level: the rationality of the defense.

The third level: the rationality of cultural norms themselves. How to judge when different cultural norms clash?

The rationality of individual behavior refers to the means-end rationality, which considers the effectiveness of the means A to achieve a certain end G. For example, if A wants to fill his stomach (G_1), he then produces an action, killing a cow to cook vegetables (A_1). Its form is: $G1 \rightarrow A_1$. Of course, the same goal G_1 can be achieved by multiple means ($A_1 \neq A_2 \neq A_3 \neq ......$) $\neq A_i$), can eat pork, can cook vegetables, can eat steamed bread and so on. This is the simplest case.

Reasonableness of defense requires the provision of reasons and defense. For example, justify killing a cow for cooking (A_1) by examining whether it conforms to a cultural norm. If A's society (an ancient society or a society with low productivity) often regards cows as a sacred animal, killing a cow to cook vegetables (A_1) is against the laws or customs of the society (C_1), then in this respect, it is an unreasonable behavior for A to kill a cow because of his desire to eat. Its form is: $C \rightarrow (G \rightarrow A)$ or $C \wedge G \rightarrow A$. The custom in A's society forbade killing cattle and cooking vegetables: $C_1 \rightarrow \neg A_1$, so even considering A's personal purpose or desire (G_1), killing cattle and cooking vegetables is still unreasonable: $C_1 \wedge G_1 \rightarrow \neg A_1$. Of course, under C_1 culture, A can achieve the target G_1 by other means, such as cooking vegetables (A_2), eating steamed bread (A_3), i.e. $C_1 \wedge G_1 \rightarrow \neg A_1 \wedge (A_2 \vee A_3)$. It is clear here that whether a reasonable action is justified depends, at the final level, on the laws, customs or norms of the society (C). Now the question is how can the rationality of the norm itself be justified in the culture? How do you judge different cultural norms when they conflict? How to solve the trans-paradigmatic rationality issue between different cultural norms, especially those that have obvious conflicts with modern civilization value system? In this regard, Steven Lukes believes that we are the reasonableness standard [8].

Lukes distinguishes two kinds of rationality: universal rationality and context-dependent rationality. The standard of the former is whether it is illogical, whether it is consistent or contradictory, and whether it is invalid reasoning. If these forms of logic and reasoning do not work in the language of a society, we cannot understand the thoughts of its members. Even the possibility of their inferences, arguments and even thinking is worthy of doubt. It is doubtful that they can predict, explain and communicate, which is the requirement of logic. The latter requires the

correlation with reality through the study of context, and provides a specific good reason that can be verified or falsified, so as to judge whether the actor's reason is appropriate. At this point, Lukes especially emphasizes the ability of successful prediction, because whether a theoretical culture or not, its continuous existence requires members of the society to have a certain degree of successful prediction and explanation ability. It is difficult for us to understand how a society without successful prediction and explanation can exist.

In this way, all beliefs can be evaluated by these two criteria: the reasonableness of context dependence can provide positive information about the beliefs to illustrate the particularity of different cultures. The first and second level of rationality proposed by Simon should be solved. The universal standard of rationality is the most basic and universal constraint on culture, in response to the third level of trans-cultural standard of rationality. However, it is too thin to respond to trans-cultural problems only with the validity of logic and reasoning. If there are two social norms that satisfy Lukes's universal standard of rationality (a logical standard that is easily met), then the question of how to compare two (or at least two) logical self-consistency social norms remains.

Primitive people and modern people predict in much the same way, and they almost always presuppose a naive independent reality. Of course, some cultures have their own, even paradoxical, poetic or religious language, but this is not the language of everyday practice. Modern civilization also has a lot of poetic language and religious language, such as "Trinity". But it is precisely because of this vagueness and anomie that a large number of theologians are required to interpret them. In contrast, if the daily language of a certain culture contains a lot of poetical language or self-contradictory language, it will become a problem for the members of the society to engage in productive work.

3. Positions of relativism

Steven Lukes summarizes five positions:[8]

S1. Distinguish between symbolic culture and theoretical (especially scientific) culture. Symbolic culture and theoretical culture are not only incommensurable, but also incomparable. For example, witchcraft in some tribes is not a scientific theory, but it has many practical functions, such as medical treatment,praying for rain, hunting and so on.

S2. Eurocentrism. Eurocentrists believe that other civilizations will follow the West's steps towards established Western standards.

S3. Other civilizations are just less rational than the West. They tried to use witchcraft and magic to explain and predict the world by certain standards, though not very successfully, but only in comparison with modern natural science. We should take a sympathetic attitude towards them.

S4. Distinguish between mystical and rational thinking, the two types of beliefs. This position is not a distinction between advanced culture and backward culture in S3, but a distinction between types. For example, primitive man had acute sensory function, artistic ability and special survival skills. They are different from modern civilizations only in their tendencies and types of thinking. We don't have an objective standard that transcends all thinking.

S5. Rationality depends on culture, and rationality depends on special cultural norms. The ability of modern civilization to control nature is a "technical standard" that other civilizations have not pursued.

This is a problem: how to compare two different and complete dictionaries. Typical cultural relativism can be summarized as the following independent assertions: [9]

P1. Different societies have different rules, and ours is only one of them.

P2. The rules of a society determine whether an action is right or not in the society.

P3. There is no universal cultural, social norm of truth.

Here, P1 is a basic statement of fact derived from anthropology, which is clearly true. P2 refers to reasonableness of defense. P3 is a typical proposition of cultural relativism. We agree with the first two propositions, but disagree with the conclusion of cultural relativism, P3, so the problem we are going to deal with now focuses on P3.

4. The wrong of relativism

For the sake of analysis, here are two examples:

Case 1.

Premise: The Greeks believed it was wrong to eat the dead, but the Karadians believed it was right.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no objective right or wrong way to eat the dead, but right or wrong are opinions, which vary from culture to culture.

Case 2.

Premise: Eskimos believed infanticide is right, but Chinese believed infanticide is wrong.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no objective right or wrong to infanticide, but right or wrong are opinions, which vary from culture to culture.

These two cases share the same logical form and reach the same conclusion: First, different cultures have different norms. Second, there are no objective truths or wrongs in the realm of ethics. Right and wrong are just opinions, and opinions vary from culture to culture.

It seems intuitively strong, but logically it doesn't work, because what is true or false about a moral proposition is not the same thing as what people actually think it is. The logical form of the premises in both cases is:

$$\forall x \forall y ((P_1(x) \rightarrow B_x(\alpha)) \wedge (P_2(y) \rightarrow B_y(\neg\alpha)) \wedge (x \neq y))$$

For any x and any y, if x is P_1, then x believes α, and if y is P_2, then y believes $\neg\alpha$, and x does not equal y. The premise has a cognitive belief operator, but the conclusion is a non-cognitive statement that is true or false. Because in cognitive logic, the first two cases are valid and the third is invalid:

First: If one knows infanticide is right, then infanticide is right, i.e. $K_x\alpha \rightarrow \alpha$.

Second: If if one knows infanticide is right, then one believes infanticide is right, i.e. $K_x\alpha \rightarrow B_x\alpha$.

Third: If one believes infanticide is right, then infanticide is right, i.e. $B_x\alpha \rightarrow \alpha$.

The argument in the above case is precisely to move from the belief statement to the fact statement, which does not follow cognitive logic. Just because different people have different beliefs about the same proposition, we cannot conclude that it is not true or false. So we can't logically come to the conclusion of cultural relativism. But while logical reasoning is wrong, the proposition itself that leads to the conclusion of cultural relativism cannot be said to be wrong. Logical reasoning is concerned only with the inferential relationship between propositions, not with the truth or falseness of individual propositions. In other words, the validity of an argument is not about the premises or the conclusion, but about the relationship between them. e.g. Premise P1. All viral diseases are infectious diseases.

Premise P2. AIDS are infectious diseases.

Conclusion C. AIDS are viral diseases.

Every sentence in this argument is true, but the structure of the argument is invalid. Therefore, once two different cultures meet Lukes' standard of universal rationality, we still cannot conclude that the proposition of cultural relativism itself is wrong even if the argument-structure of cultural relativism is problematic. Unfortunately, it is difficult for Lukas to give more constraints trans-cultures.

5. Conclusion

Relativism is not a single topic, but rather presents a family resemblance: the relativists in the philosophy of language believe that meaning is relative to language. Reference is relative to a conceptual schema. Truth values are relative to the theory. The relativists of epistemology believe that reality is relative to culture; Perceived value is relative to the community. Relativism in the philosophy of science holds that metaphysical commitments are relative to scientific paradigms. Relativists in aesthetics hold that aesthetic value is relative to historical period [10]. The most typical is cultural relativism. Moral judgments and norms of custom are relative to culture, and they are not commensurable with each other. There is no neutral standard. Different types of relativism have a

common form: a variable y (which can be value, epistemology, aesthetics, ethical norms, empirical, etc.) depends on and covaries with an independent variable x (paradigm, culture, conceptual framework, belief system, language, etc.) to some extent [5].

In short, the change of independent variable x will lead to the change of dependent variable y and even the whole proposition. In human language, a large part of the predicates are relation predicates, R(x,y). Here, x and y are under a relation R, so x and y are relative to each other. This is a linguistic feature or logical feature, which is a methodological and semantic approach. This generalized relative is not the same as the folk understanding of "anything goes".

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