

# The Aristotelian Conception of Principle as the Theoretical Foundation for a Healthy Cultural Relativism

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**Abstract: Purpose:** To elucidate if the three most accepted modalities of cultural relativism -descriptive, normative, and cognitive- are philosophically valid, and consequently healthy for knowledge development, cultural understandings, and knowledge reliability.

**Theoretical Framework:** The theoretical ideas oscillated among the pure reasoning behind cultural relativism, culture theory, the premises of Husserl's phenomenology, and the Aristotelian notions of principle and relation, among others.

**Design / Methodology / Approach:** The Aristotelian dialectic, which poses an idea to discussion, analyzes it to discard any contradiction; if contradiction emerges, the data and notions behind the discussed idea are hierarchized to the main principles of knowledge for improvement or correction.

**Findings:** The only valid and healthy modality of cultural relativism is the "descriptive" one because it truly seeks the approach and understanding of alterity/otherness as the cultural relativism reasoning claims.

**Research, Practical & Social implication:** The configuration of normative and epistemological systems based on cultural relativism is contradictory, unhealthy, and dangerous for culture and research conclusions.

**Originality / Value:** This work consists of the attempt to conciliate the foundations of western philosophy with the contemporary philosophical doctrines as an invitation to achieve the ideal of culture: set a proper world for humanity.

Keywords: cultural relativism, foundation, philosophy, principle, theoretical.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The current document is an argumentation sustained on Aristotelian philosophy seeking to reach a healthy perspective of a cultural relativism, for reaching the set goal, the structure of the text is as follows: it starts with a conceptual framework for configuring a standard semantic of the medullary ideas. Then, the notions of culture and relativism are discussed for making observation and pointing out why the term of cultural relativism emerged. The third step consist of discussing the different types of cultural relativism for comparing them to the previous discussed notions and, set the mental scenario for in the fourth step analyzing cultural relativism from the notion of principle; after this last analysis, the conclusion was drawn.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

- Cultural Relativism according to Aya [20] is the affirmation that there's no such thing as objective knowledge tested by fact and no objective truth, that knowledge is a social construction.
- Relation refers to the happening of "connection" and the essence of "connection" itself. The way how connection happens may be in two ways: purely mental, or mixed, corporal mental. Pure mental connection happens only on the mind, such as logic and mathematics, while the mixed connection is the one that happens based on experience. According to Aristotle [13] the essence of connection depends on two postures, the first one is the connection of the subject with everything that it's not the subject itself, and the interconnection of the subject with itself. Relation is imperative to be understood for this paper because the misinterpretation of this category causes relativism.
- Principle is understood by Aristotle [5], [8] in different ways, the main conceptualization is as the point from where any movement starts, then, movement can be divided in two kinds according to the connection with the subject: intrinsic and extrinsic. Extrinsic manifests in one main sense: locomotion; intrinsic in contrast can be understood as generation and prudence, this last one is in fact partly intrinsic and extrinsic because prudence is the reflection

of the inner movement of thoughts, passions and will, which at the end is transmitted to the exterior by production and/or guidance.

- Essence is understood by Aristotle [5], [8] in two ways, the first one is in an ontological sense referring though to the most remote substratum of being itself; the other sense is gnoseological-logical because it enables knowledge because the intellect understands essence as the species of any genus, without the species there's no specific differentiation and certainty is impossible because there's no possibility for definition.
- Order is a consequence of the architectonical conception of philosophy that the Greek Philosopher developed. Aristotle [4], [7] claimed philosophy (wisdom) is the science of the first causes and principles, therefore sciences are more exact (reliable) the closer they participate from the main principles. Consequently, as an architect, the philosopher (wise) is to build order according to the nature of knowledge itself, to its closeness to the main principles.
- Culture according to Angelo Altieri Megale [2] is the development of human intellectual and moral faculties which build the proper world for humanity, this idea was taken from Cicero [9] who affirmed that human soul (faculties) as fields -if they are not cultivated- they become weak and consequently unable to produce fruit. The Roman Philosopher claimed that philosophy removes vices from root because it is culture. Of course, there are contemporary perspectives to consider, Martinez and Ojeda [10] mention that there are two positionings about culture, on one side there are the materialistic who affirm culture is an observable behavior and the material objects that facilitate the social, political, and/or physical adaptation of a group. In contrast, the mentalists consider culture as an abstraction, a series of given norms for behavior and production of material objects.

### **3. DISCUSSION AROUND THE TERMS "CULTURE" AND "RELATIVISM"**

As mentioned before, the category "relation" can be understood as "connection," so, any being/subject has at the same time a "self-connection" and a "alter-connection" which can also be purely mental, or mixed. Due to the nature of this text, the notion "culture" is going to be taken as the "subject" of discussion because it's necessary to explore the connection of the notion culture through itself, its essence, towards grounding a universal conception; also it's necessary to explore it as such for understanding the connection of the notion culture as the genus of several species, which is the alter-connection perspective, and from where cultural relativism emerges. The self-connection is taken as the equivalent to the intrinsic notion of principle and the alter-connection to the extrinsic one.

Taking as the essence of culture what its etymology affirms (intrinsic connection), many anthropological manifestations nowadays considered as cultural wouldn't be considered as such anymore because not all traditions, not every anthropological action cultivates human faculties, or remove vices through virtue. The expected reaction to this affirmation from cultural relativism is that virtue and vice depend on the context of any culture, but the Aristotelian definition of virtue is neutral, this means that the way how Aristotle defined virtue is contextless.

For the Greek philosopher virtue [6] is what can be found in-between excesses and deficiencies; therefore, virtue is a middle-point position, the more people reach the balance between two extremes the closer to virtue they get and, when people's actions get closer or even reach any excess or deficiency, they get closer to vice.

Nevertheless, it's not being denied that observable behavior and the material objects that facilitate the social, political, and/or physical adaptation of a group, given norms for behavior and production of material objects aren't cultural, the discussion states that not all of them are. But, for a better-grounded answer it's important to discuss the notion "relativism".

How did relativism emerge in social science? The adoption of Edmund Husserl's methodology by social sciences is one answer because applying the negative premises to any social research leads to a sort of relativism. In other words, relativism is the result of an obsession in achieving the ideal objectivity guided by the [2] elimination of all subjectivity, the exclusion of any theory and, the suspension of the tradition when researching just to capture the pure manifestation of a phenomenon.

Asti Vera [2] when discussing Husserl's ideas mentions that scientists through field research only reach a particular knowledge which they classify in general categories, but they don't achieve universal knowledge because they don't access to the essence. Curiously, the characteristic phenomenology's inductive methodology constructs knowledge

and, the hierarchization of the information is done through an eidetic reduction that points to achieve the eidetic intuition, but due to the polemic nature of intuition scientist have remained in the general categories by only reaching the eidetic reduction. In other words, this sort of categorization is relative to the induction of the phenomenon and not the deduction from unmovable principles.

Relativism is then a connection among phenomena which obtained data are hierarchized based on phenomena themselves instead to principles and, because phenomena are variable then social science's categorizations are dependable to those variations. In other words, hierarchizing relating to steady principles, to the essence impregnates their characteristic steadiness to particular and general knowledge permitting then the configuration of universal knowledge by setting unmovable parameters for interpretation, this is the setting of order. In contrast, relating to the dynamic social phenomena as the principle and/or essence of knowledge impregnates their characteristic variability to particular knowledge, allowing only to reach a general knowledge as a consequence for setting circumstantial parameters of interpretation.

Transporting this reasoning to the cultural area it can be said that the term "relativism" is senseless to culture if the concept of culture is omitted, therefore, the essence of culture is taken as the principle and any anthropological manifestation loyal to the essence of culture is cultural because it's relative to the essence of culture, in opposition, any anthropological manifestation that isn't loyal to the essence of culture it's going to be relative to the phenomenon but indeed relativistic to the essence. That relativistic relation to the essence is what generates cultural relativism.

From a different perspective, true is that repetition, patterns, and regularity [11] are parameters for nature's objective knowledge, therefore this continuity can also be understood as recurrency, which is the principle for quantitative and qualitative research. But, if the recurrency of a phenomenon and the continuity among its causes are taken as the only guide for constructing knowledge and valid conclusions then there's a danger of ending hierarchizing according to the recurrency of the evidence, not necessarily to an essence. This constructive hierarchization of knowledge is not opposite or contradictory to Aristotelian philosophy but certainly is incomplete because there's no deductive ordination from the universal (the essence) of culture and if the essence of culture is unaware, then the measure of culture becomes the phenomenon and not the notion.

Why are notions important? According to Aristotle [4], [7] science is true knowledge validated through its main principles and causes, consequently, the chosen method to research is just a mean to an end but if methodology is taken as the principle of knowledge, true principles of knowledge are taken aside or relativized. Said it differently, if Aristotle's definition of science is replaced by for example "reducing data to main categories" (eidetic reduction) the focus of science will be the implementation of certain methodology to get the most reliable data from a social phenomenon to categorize it, but not to seek the main principles that make that phenomenon to be what it is; and mostly, it would hide and/or relativized medullar reasonings and questions such as: if a phenomenon happens differently in other regions, what makes it to be analogical? in part similar (a phenomenon) and in part different (specific geographic differences). What is the essence of a phenomenon that allows it to be the same in the whole world but with certain variations?

Summarizing, if relativism is the alter-extrinsic connection and culture is the self-intrinsic connection, then, when conclusions are drawn from the extrinsic connection the notion of culture gets lost among the multiplicity and variability of the phenomena; on the other hand, when conclusions are drawn from the essence of culture as the principle, hierarchization-ordination becomes easier to achieve because the reference is an unmovable principle which helps to define hues, contrasts, and more important, to point out contradictions.

For example, in Mexico there's a phenomenon called "Narco-culture," [3], [16] this term has been coined from the characteristics of narcotraffic as a way of living, this means from the phenomenon itself. Undoubtedly narcotraffic manifests an observable behavior and produces material objects that facilitate the social, political, and/or physical adaptation of a group, there's a transmission of norms for behavior and production of material objects, then, the question is: because narcotraffic reunites the elements that anthropologists affirm define culture, must it be defined as culture?

In contrast, if the term narco-culture is analyzed from the definition of Cicero the main question is: how does narcotraffic cultivate humanity, how does it eliminate vices through virtue? The essence of notions is imperative for cultivated conclusions, otherwise, relativistic conclusions are drawn and they're not epistemological nor ethical.

#### 4. DISCUSSING DIFFERENT TYPES OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM

When researching about cultural relativism there's a predominancy of studies about the ethical dimension of it, but there are two other types of cultural relativism that have been identified and studied. The three types of cultural relativism are descriptive, normative, and cognitive.

Descriptive cultural relativism according to Tilley [12] is when different cultures accept different "moralities" or moral principles. Chokr [17] adds that there is a multiplicity of principles associated to different cultures, different people, places, and eras. Kala [15] defines descriptive cultural relativism as the one based on empirical observations in varied societies. Consequently, it can be said that descriptive cultural relativism is the one that draws conclusions from the field work, the raw data, from the phenomenon itself; therefore, it's on this level where relative ideas are born and developed because conclusions are generally categorized through an eidetic reduction. It's called descriptive because it seeks to picture with the most possible fidelity the anthropological manifestations with the least interpretation possible. Of course, Husserl's negative premises are plenty applied in the construction of this knowledge, which is not necessarily negative as long as they are taken as a mean and not as an end.

Normative cultural relativism is the more discussed type of the three Boudon [20] mentions that this type of relativism is characterized by a polytheism of values, by a cultural arbitrariness enclosed in this formulation: to each community its culture, to each culture it values. Aya [19] defines it as the denial of a universal morality, there are only cultural values and norms. Kala [15] mentions that this type of relativism conveys a claim about rightness of moral codes of any culture. It claims that people ought to comply with the moral norms and judgements of their own culture. It can be said, then, that normative cultural relativism is a continuation of descriptive cultural relativism because it transmits to ethics the omission of judgement from a circumstantial dimension, this means that cultures are judged from the specificity of their context, intensifying relativism, and complicating the dialog among different postures due to right and wrong are dependable to the circumstantiality of each culture.

Aya says that [19] cognitive cultural relativism affirms there is no such thing as objective knowledge tested by fact and no objective truth, that knowledge is a social construction. It can be said that cognitive cultural relativism tends to go beyond descriptive and normative by trying to set the steady-objective principle for multiple and non-objective interpretations, it's the attempt to set the true principle for affirming there's no actual true knowledge. Cognitive cultural relativism is trying to validate relativism from a philosophical level by setting a universal principle for banishing universal knowledge, which of course is clearly contradictory. By trying to set a universal principle, universal knowledge must be validated first and consequently accepted.

#### 5. ANALYZING CULTURAL RELATIVISMS FROM THE NOTION OF PRINCIPLE

When ordering knowledge based on its own nature, Aristotle [14] defined three levels: pragmaton, kath'hekaston and kath'olou. When talking about knowledge itself, pragmaton is the raw data, and kath'hekaston is a singular/particular area of knowledge, this means these two levels are empirical knowledge and therefore the equivalent to field research. Similarly, the same Aristotle divided philosophy in theoretical and practical, theoretical for understanding reality and practical for understanding the nature of human action. Following this reasoning, descriptive cultural relativism is the equivalent to the levels pragmaton and kath'hekaston because they refer to the data itself and the general categorization of them. It's also important to mention that these belong to the theoretical dimension of philosophy.

On the other hand, normative cultural relativism is the equivalent of descriptive cultural relativism but in the practical side of philosophy, it's the ethical implementation of raw and general data. And, as it has been said, due to descriptive cultural relativism transmits the omission of universal judgement to practical philosophy because its parameters of interpretation are dependable to the phenomenon, ethics become relative.

To what it concerns to cognitive cultural relativism, it can be said that it is hiding the notion of culture by only focusing on a relative cognition, it's trying to work from epistemological levels trying to establish an epistemology of non-epistemology, which is undoubtedly contradictory. In other words, if the universal level for Aristotle is the kath'olou, cognitive cultural relativism is seeking to define the kath'olou of variability not from a self-intrinsic essential connection but through the random alter-extrinsic connection of phenomena, particularness is trying to be universalize.

Synthesizing, a principle understood as locomotion refers strictly to physical movement, changing from one time-space position to another-, the very movement of the world, of tangible reality. This is why the notion of principle from

this perspective reveals the alter-extrinsic connection because it's the relation among phenomena, the level from where raw data (pragmaton) are taken and the field for mixed connections. Once having raw data, according to the relateness among same data (phenomena) they are hierarchize as particular or general (kath'hekaston) knowledge, which from social sciences methodology is when the eidetic reduction happens. Due to this inductive process, the extrinsic dimension of guidance/production directs field work, experiments, and the intrinsic dimension of guidance produces/generates knowledge by unfolding the particularities of phenomena; of course, this guidance/production is the methodology, which is partly physical and partly abstract.

In other words, anthropological manifestations such as festivities, religion, politics, education happen (pragmaton) and through methodology research data are taken, then, those anthropological manifestations are compared among them (alter-extrinsic relation) for reaching the eidetic reduction by dimensioning those anthropological manifestations as cultural, because they match the definition of it (self-intrinsic connection), at least accordingly to cultural relativism. This indiscriminated dimensioning as cultural any anthropological manifestation is what leads to, and sustains cultural relativism, because the reference for ordering knowledge is the multiplicity of anthropological phenomena and not the essence of a universal notion of culture.

For exemplifying the attempt for ordination of knowledge from cultural relativism, here it is a deductive example where the constant movement of the phenomena are taken as principle:

1. Cognitive Cultural Relativism as a Pseudo-Universal Notion: no objective knowledge exists, only cultural beliefs.
  - A. General Category of Normative Cultural Relativism: to each community its culture, to each culture it values.
  - B. General Category of Descriptive Cultural Relativism:
    - I. Particular Notion of culture: observable behavior, transmission of norms for behavior and production of material objects that facilitate the social, political, and/or physical adaptation of a group.
      - a. Raw data / pragmaton: any anthropologic manifestations.

On the other hand, understanding principle as the beginning of movement from the essence (the most remote substratum of being) and therefore the self-intrinsic connection sets the parameter for order by dimensioning and, ordinating knowledge according to its nature/essence reaching and generating universal/essential notions. This is how the double nature of guidance/production happens as before: the extrinsic dimension of guidance/production directs field work, experiments, and the inner dimension of guidance generates knowledge by unfolding the particularities of phenomena, but with the extension of the process by analyzing data through an essence.

In other words -as before-, anthropological manifestations happen (pragmaton) and through methodology research data are taken, then, those anthropological manifestations are contrasted among them (alter-extrinsic relation) for comparison and consequently reaching the eidetic reduction by partially dimensioning those anthropological manifestations as cultural. Then, those partial dimensioning are filtered through the universal definition of culture (self-intrinsic connection) and if they mismatch then they will certainly be anthropologic manifestations, but not cultural. Here is where the guidance/production process is elevated to prudence, the other dimension of principle that is at the same time intrinsic and extrinsic, but which is closer to the essence and the reason why it's superior to just guidance/production, because being closer to the principle assures knowledge's trueness and reliability. This is why prudence is purely philosophical.

The order/hierarchy of knowledge from Aristotelian philosophy is as it follows:

1. Philosophy's Universal Notion of Culture as Principle: Any activity that cultivates (makes grow, bloom, develop) human faculties. This notion is discussed, polemized and defined by Philosophical Anthropology.
  - Ethical universal of culture: Anthropologic actions are ethical as long they don't contradict the universal notion of culture, which minimizes vices through the maximization of virtues, understanding as vice any excessive or defective intentional action, and virtue as any intentional action tending to a middle point in-between extremes.
  - Epistemological universal of culture: there's a philosophical causality that backs up and sustains the universality of the definition of culture by clarifying its essence and remaining loyal to it, this way it's possible

to eliminate any contradiction in any general or specific level. The reliance to the essence is what permits the ordination of cultural knowledge and most of all the elimination to any possibility for relativism.

A. General Areas of Culture:

- Theoretical/scientific classification: empirical, theoretical, mixed.
- Ethical/Teleological Classification: politics, economy, education, art, applied sciences/technology.
- Range/Extension: continental, national.

I. Specific-Particular Cultural Manifestations

- Nature of knowledge/science: empirical, theoretical, mixed.
- Ethical/Teleological: anthropology, sociology, psychology.
- Range/Extension: regional, local.

a) Raw Data: every anthropologic manifestation.

For exemplifying both models, the case of narco-culture will be analyzed from both perspectives. From a cultural relativism perspective, the process begins when putting to the record the characteristics of narcotraffic phenomena in order that they can become data (pragmaton). Once having data, they are related among them for posterior categorization according to the recurrency of their happening and characteristics (happening of connection). This way, all the facts from narcotraffic that have to do with mankind will be anthropological, and consequently cultural, leading to the general category of "narco-culture." When this reasoning jumps to the practical dimension of philosophy to ethics, narcotraffic is good because it's seen and judged from a deficient self-intrinsic connection driven from an only perspective of alter-extrinsic connection. On the proposed model it looks as it follows:

1. Cognitive Cultural Relativism as a Pseudo-Universal Notion: Narcotraffic is an anthropologic activity and because for cultural relativism any anthropologic activity is cultural, narcotraffic is culture.
  - A. General Category of Normative Cultural Relativism: Because narcotraffic is seen from the inside it has its particular ethical system, virtues will be those actions that allow narcotraffic to continue existing, and evil actions those that attempt to it.
  - B. General Category of Descriptive Cultural Relativism:
    - I. Particular Notion of culture: observable behavior, transmission of norms for behavior and production of material objects that facilitate the social, political, and/or physical adaptation of narco-culture.
      - a. Raw data / pragmaton: any anthropologic activity of narcotraffic.

The order/hierarchy of the knowledge from Aristotelian philosophy is as it follows:

2. Philosophy's Universal Notion of Culture as Principle: Narcotraffic must not be considered as culture because its activities are extreme, they go against humanity itself by not removing vices through virtue.
  - Ethical: narcotraffic actions contradict the universal of culture, therefore it cannot be ethical.
  - Epistemological: there's an essence of culture grounded on philosophical reasoning the universalizes the notion and it's compatible to any level of knowledge and praxis, therefore, due to the contradiction to the essence of culture, science cannot affirm narcotraffic is culture.
    - A. General Areas of Culture:
      - Theoretical/scientific classification: the understanding of narcotraffic needs to be understood empirically and theoretically.
      - Ethical/Teleological Classification: being narcotraffic an anthropological activity, it has a social finality that must and can be studied from politics, economy, education, art, applied sciences, for increasing its understanding.

- Range/Extension: continental, national.

#### I. Specific-Particular Cultural Manifestations

- Nature of knowledge/science: the understanding of narcotraffic needs to be understood empirically and theoretically.
  - Ethical/Teleological: being narcotraffic an anthropological activity, it has a social finality that must and can be studied from the areas closer to the phenomenon such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology.
  - Range/Extension: regional, local.
- b) Raw Data: any anthropologic activity.

As it can be noticed, the drawing of conclusions are contrasting from one model to the other, because the model of cultural relativism (and in general, of social sciences) is purely inductive, and the model of Aristotelian philosophy is both, inductive just as the social sciences, but deductive when ordering knowledge and praxis to a universal principle.

## 6. CONCLUSION

¿Is it possible a healthy cultural relativism? The answer is yes, as long as it doesn't invade levels of order to which it does not belong, epistemological disorder causes confusion and misunderstandings that are later transmitted to ethics, causing an ethical disorder.

With the appropriate ordination, descriptive cultural relativism is not only correct but also necessary because as a first approach to the phenomenon the negative premises of Husserl are the ones that certainly help to capture the phenomenon itself; on the other hand, taking the negative premises as principle only leads to relativism because the principle for interpretation is the phenomenon, and the nature of this is constant change. This way, the self-inner connection of the notions that define culture are subordinated to constant change subordinating as well to constant change knowledge and ethics.

Taking the Ciceronian definition of culture as principle, it sustains the fidelity of knowledge and consequently praxis (ethics) at any level because of the self-inner connection, the essence of culture, matches with the finality of human faculties (virtue) leading to and avoidance of contradiction, so, without contradiction there's no possibility for relativism. In other words, the coherency in the self-intrinsic connection of the universal essence of culture allows to work as a lighthouse for the subordinated -general, particular- knowledge which belongs to the alter-extrinsic connection, the unmovable essence sets order to the constant changing data taken from phenomena. When this happens a conciliation between the materialistic and mental conceptions of culture that anthropologist have is plausible.

As a final comment, a healthy cultural relativism is possible when there's an ordination to the principle of culture because it's just a posture towards the approach and acquisition of data but not an epistemological, ethical, or philosophical field, the contradiction due to the nature of its connection doesn't allow it. Therefore, descriptive cultural relativism is the only true and valid way of cultural relativism and it's ruled by empirical knowledge, by the mere happening of alter-extrinsic connection, normative and cognitive are not, those are dangerous positionings towards culture and therefore humanity. Now, an imperative question emerges: with all the plurality of anthropological manifestations that are taken as cultural and they're not, what is the principle for counter resting relativism? The most viable way for answering is also Aristotelian, the definition of human being as a "rational animal" contains the basis for a universal ethics in the way that biology and rationality are meant to be developed and reach excellence -health and education for instance- and any interruption towards the acquisition of that excellency is not ethical because it's an obstruction of human nature, nature from where the universal conception of culture was taken, from where notions as virtue and science where developed.

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