

Cultural Relativism

A form of Ethical Relativism

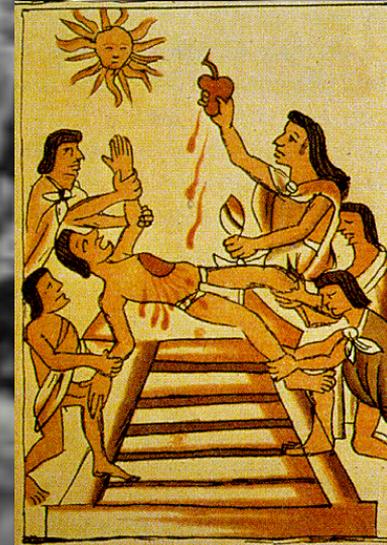
Guiding Question

- Is there one cultural practice that is more correct than any other?



Cultural Relativism Defined

- The belief that there is no moral truth that applies to all peoples at all times
 - since there are no absolute moral standards for moral judgement.
 - There is no “right” and “wrong” just different



- Cultural norms change across time and space
- Greece BC 220 slavery is OK; Greece AD 2011 slavery is not OK
 - Papua New Guinea: Cannibalism is okay in some tribes; Great Britain, not so much

Opposite of Cultural Relativism



- Ethnocentrism – Judging someone's culture solely by the values of your own culture

CR: tightening the definition

- It is not each person, but each person's culture that is the standard by which actions are to be measured.
 - Societies have structure, including ethical standards. This is what makes them work.
 - Laws and rules provide stability and order in life. But they are relative to a given culture.
- Consequence: no ethical system is better than any other. They are just different.

CR: Judging others

- There is very wide variance in moral systems and practices between societies.
 - Ex. capital punishment in the US but not in the UK
- Yet: if our moral feelings do not originate from knowledge of an absolute moral measure, can we judge others (absolutely)?

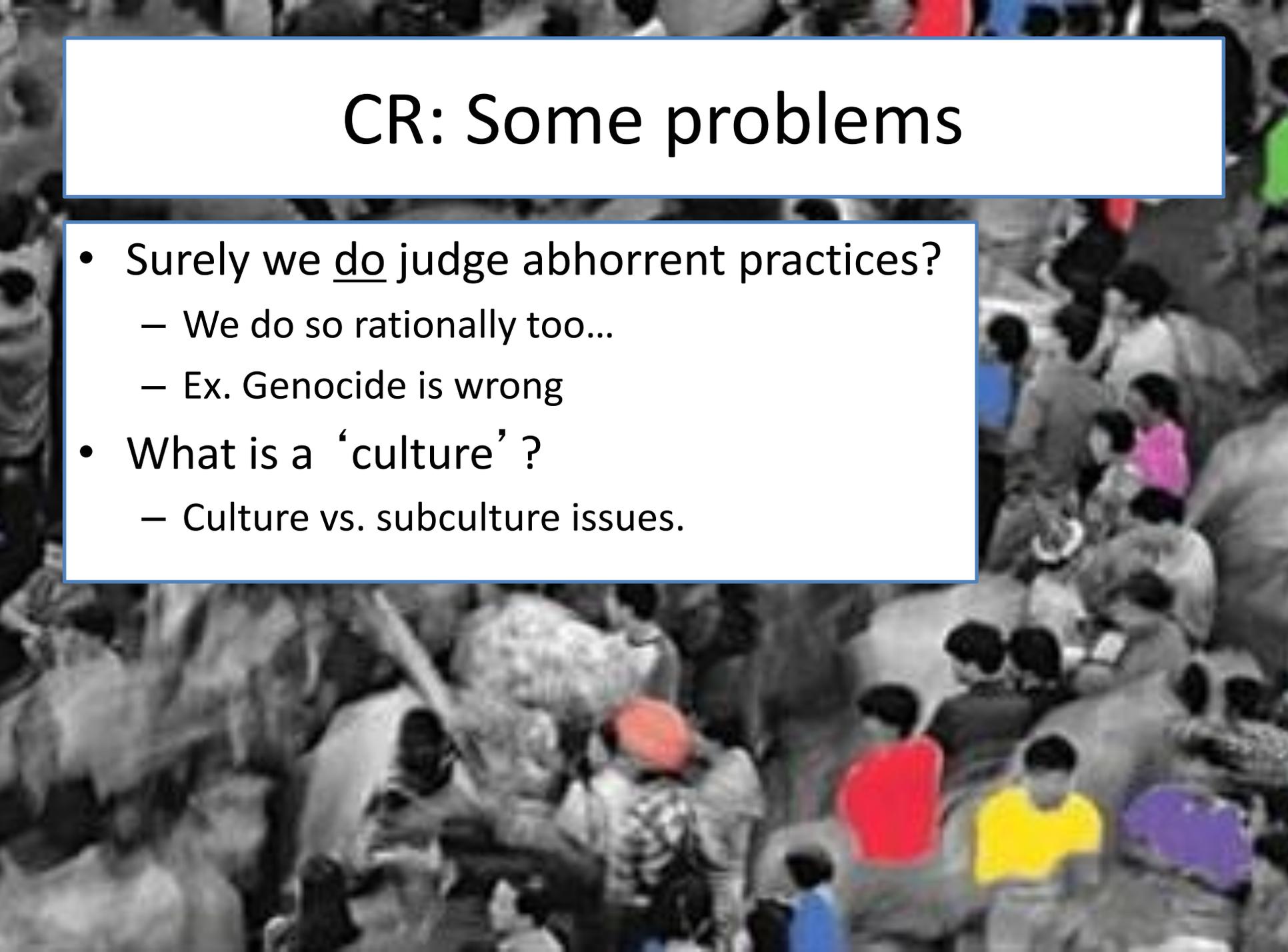


CR: Advantages

- promotes tolerance, not ‘ethnocentrism’ .
 - recognises differences but does not judge them by some measure outside the culture in question.
 - reminds us that our way and what is familiar cannot be assumed to be the right and only way.
 - ‘Live and Let Live’ attitude.
- explains why similar cultures have similar moral systems

CR: Some problems

- Surely we do judge abhorrent practices?
 - We do so rationally too...
 - Ex. Genocide is wrong
- What is a ‘culture’ ?
 - Culture vs. subculture issues.

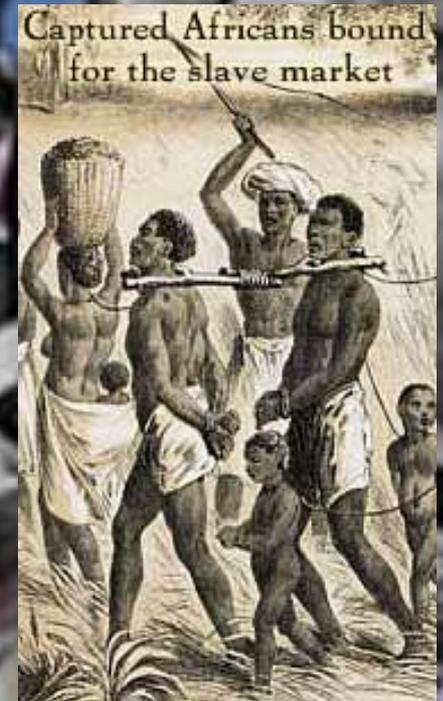


CR: Coherence issue

- Is C.R self contradictory, incoherent? Consider:
 - There is no absolute truth
 - Intolerance is wrong
- In practice these tends to lead to: Tolerant intolerance! Absolute relativism!
 - Self-contradiction: affirms two mutually exclusive things at the same time!

CR: Progress issue

- If truth and rightness are relative to cultures then what explains moral change?
- In a slave culture a relativist cannot argue on moral grounds that slavery should be abolished. To do so would require appeal to some standard other than the existing social mores, which allow slavery.
 - Should accept cultural practice of slavery, and reject objectors as intolerant?



Major Problems of Cultural Relativism

- If CR is true, what basis do you have for calling for the end of racism and, torture, genocide, child labour?
 - Such an appeal would be intolerant, even arrogant.
 - Worse: whoever controls the culture is the final judge of truth.

Uses of Cultural Relativism

- Cultural Soul Searching
 - “If its ok for another culture, why not ours?”
- Anthropologists:
 - Study cultures, not compare

