

[...] statements that are implausibly seen as relative. I mean the statements – understatements, rather – in List 1. Cultural relativists tend to avoid such statements when arguing their case. They prefer List 2, which puts their thesis in a more attractive light.

*List 1:*

- Torturing children for the fun of hearing them scream is wrong.
- Ethnic cleansing is not so good.
- Kindness to those who are suffering is *prima facie* right.
- Massive, unrestrained poisoning of rivers and oceans is *prima facie* wrong
- Launching a nuclear war merely to show off military might is morally inappropriate.
- Imperialist domination of other nations is ethically out of line.
- Causing pointless, unbearable pain is morally uncalled for.

*List 2:*

- Polygyny is wrong.
- Monogamy is permissible.
- Churchgoing is obligatory
- Marriage before the age of sixteen is morally intolerable.
- Smoking peyote is immoral.
- Premarital sex is not right.

The statements in each list qualify as moral judgements. So if the Thesis [sc. cultural relativism] is true, not one item in list 1 is universally valid. This is a problem for cultural relativists in two ways. First, it is implausible to think that every item in list 1 is valid for only *some* cultures. If the judgement about launching nuclear wars is valid relative to North African culture (no relativist will deny that it is), why should we deny that it is valid relative to North American (or any other) culture? The point is not that we can find no significant differences between the two cultures, but that the differences are not of a kind that can make the deed in question – starting a nuclear war merely to show off military might – wrong for the first culture but right for the second. It will not do to say that the customs of the two cultures differ, and that morality is a function of custom. [...]

Second, cultural relativists do not really believe – I mean *really* believe – that the items in list 1 lack universal validity. Perhaps they ‘believe’ it in that they are willing to *say* it sometimes, and perhaps when they say it they intend no deceit. However, this is not to believe it in a full-blooded sense. (John J. Tilley (1998): Cultural Relativism, Universalism, and the Burden of Proof, *Millennium* 27, S. 275–98: S. 287f.)

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Rules of behavior can be based on such very different considerations as:

*prudence* (advancing personal or communal self-interest)

*custom* (“simply not done” or “that’s just how we X’s do things”)

*law* (acting in line with legal mandates)

*tabu* (pleasing or avoiding displeasing the good or evil spirits, the gods, “fate,” etc.)

*morality* (caring and concern for the best interests of people-in-general).

(Nicholas Rescher (1989): *Moral Absolutes. An Essay on the Nature and the Rationale of Morality*, New York, S. 22)