

## Cultural Evaluation

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### Definition

Cultural evaluation denotes the assessment of the value of culture according to a potentially infinite range of rubrics. The term does not inherently require reliance upon perfectionist or good-based criteria and may be grounded in deontological conceptions of rights and justice. It may often be associated with assessment across or between groups and societies.

### Description

The evaluation of culture has a long, ubiquitous history in practice and an embryonic presence as an academic pursuit. Humans have, from the earliest of times, evaluated culture, particularly that of other groups. In *Germania*, for example, Tacitus produced a comparative and normative analysis of the culture of Germanic and Roman peoples, ascribing differences in part to environmental factors as well as moral failings in Rome itself (see Chapters 35 and 44 of *Germania*). In the broadest of senses, monotheistic faiths evaluate the cultures of others according to their adherence to articles of faith, while Marx's view of progress as the development of the capacity for the satisfaction of need led him to appraise Western capitalism and criticize the "stagnation" of India (Avineri, [1969](#), pp. 93–94). In general, the various incarnations of Enlightenment thought, with their foundationalist appeal to notions of universality and objectivity, articulate different conceptions of cultural evaluation, assessing culture according to such criteria as their contribution to human well-being, reason, and respect for persons. Given that these evaluations have often favored Western societies, the practice of evaluating culture is necessarily controversial. Conflicts, conquests, subjugations, persecutions, murder, and deleterious, paternalistic interventions, such as those by the British and Australian authorities in Aboriginal Australian communities, have all been motivated by explicit or implicit forms of cultural evaluation.

Examining the bases of judgement has been hindered by the ways in which culture and society are elided or regarded as synonymous. They are not. Societies are configurations of human beings with interdependent needs. As a species, we cannot persist across generations in total isolation from one another. However, living together creates problems (Goudsblom 1977, pp. 137-138). In order merely to survive, people need control mechanisms 'over what are usually called "natural events"', 'over what are usually called "social relationships"', and 'over [the self by the] individual' (Elias 1978, 156). This creates the need for culture. For Clifford Geertz, culture is 'best seen not as complexes of concrete behaviour patterns – customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters', but 'as a set of control mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call

“programs”) – for the governing of behaviour (Geertz 2000, 44). Culture is an evolutionary adaptation that grants human beings the capacity to develop institutions that enable survival in a range of contexts. It is this capacity for adaptation that grants culture a unique place in human evolution and provides scope for evaluation since, unlike biological adaptation in other species, human beings have the ability to adopt different programmes for engaging with each other and their circumstances. It also means that, while we can talk of societies (human configurations) with varying degrees of isolation and integration, we ought to talk of culture, not cultures, since the latter does not easily map onto the former and is rarely capable of isolation and abstraction (Johnson 2013).

However, intellectually, a number of approaches, particularly within anthropology, have arisen directly to challenge such judgments, arguing that “‘native’ ways [are] not necessarily inferior and that ‘universal’ or ‘natural’ concepts [are] anything but” (Johnson, 2011, pp. 278). These divergent approaches have often been crudely banded together under the banner of “relativism.” Relativism, in its purest form, denotes belief in the irreducible subjectivity of human experience, employing social constructivism epistemologically and methodologically. At base, there is belief that symbolism, actions, and language are utilized, not to represent objects, but to explain and give meaning to life within the “moral space” of each human group (Hastrup, 1995, p. 11). The feelings of bemusement and/or superiority felt, for example, by Enlightenment thinkers engaging in [cross-cultural comparison](#) when confronted by the “backwardness” of non-Western/non-modern societies resulted not from recognition of an objective cultural deficit but, rather, from the transcendence of moral spaces and the discovery that the observed culture had failed to construct similar moral categories (See Lévi-Strauss, 1992, pp. 7–8, 28). Enlightenment philosophy, critics argue, has made the error of assuming “equivalence of human nature and his own cultural standards” (Benedict, 1989, p. 6). The claim, here, is that there are simply no objective, universal criteria by which to evaluate meaningfully across or between societies. Methodologically, therefore, “Other minds, other cultures, other languages and other theoretical schemes call for understanding from within. Seen from within, they make us doubt whether there is anything universal under the sun” (Hollis & Lukes, 1982, p. 1).

Upon this analytical foundation rest a number of contradictory positions, two of which are relevant here. The first approach shares many of the central corollaries of skepticism in asserting “the view that nothing is really [objectively] either right or wrong, or that there are no moral principles with a reasonable claim to legitimacy” (Hatch 1983, p. 369). All moral or evaluative claims are relative to the particular moral space in which they develop. They are thoroughly intersubjective, being derived from the interaction of subjective beings. Judgments can be made but must be understood as being grounded in foundationless language games. This is evident, for example, in Richard Rorty’s ( 1991, pp. 13–14) pragmatic defense of human rights. One logical conclusion of anti-foundational positions on the possibility and nature of evaluation is that while there is nothing objectively good or right about the use of systems of cultural evaluation, there is also nothing objectively bad or wrong either. This tenet suggests that, not only are there no enduring interests, there is also no objective reason to grant value to interests once they are culturally constructed.

The second position might best be described as culturalist, holding that as cultural constitution is essential to the development of our behavior and view of the world, culture is, in and of itself, of universal value to human beings. While there are no legitimate universal systems of evaluation, there are many legitimate local ones, each structuring the ways of life of those within particular

moral spheres. As such, these moral spheres should be not simply tolerated or viewed indifferently but affirmed and validated as local sources of the good. From the skeptical view that “nothing is really [objectively] either right or wrong,” we move, in culturalism, to the view that what is right is what we have created and what in turn has created us. That is, for Sandel ( [1984](#), p. 247), “we live no ‘answer’, only answers” which we should validate as the source of each group’s self-determination and self-perpetuation. This means that ethnocentric systems of evaluation can have no cross-cultural validity, even as an extension of an ongoing historical conversation. Each system of evaluation must remain firmly within its own moral space. Here, the [well-being](#) of groups (or cultural species) is seen to be dependent upon the perpetuation of a culture which is particularly theirs (see Caney’s, [2000](#), p. 62 discussion of “alien imposition”). The approach appears to assert the universality and objectivity of its account of human well-being as the ability to live according to the traditions of one’s cultural group. Cross-cultural evaluation, in addition to being subjective, is also fundamentally harmful, as it calls “into question the dominant [values](#) of that society” and “the survival and independence of separate political communities” (Walzer, [2000](#), p. 61) causing, among other things, “alienation and resentment” (Taylor, [1975](#), p. 337). While apparently emerging from epistemological relativism, the nature of the culturalist normative approach differs significantly from anti-foundationalism. Though minimalistic, the account is seen both to apply to all humans and to exist independently of cultural consensus. This forms the basis for an unacknowledged system of cultural evaluation since culturalists do, and logically must, oppose culture or cultural practices which transgress the sovereignty of other societies through imperialistic tradition or impulse. On this basis, expansionist, modern Western culture is criticized in particular.

There are serious issues with both positions. The former may either fail to take a position on the harm or otherwise of a culture’s practices or regard the identification of harm as singularly subjective. The latter may be “subject to criticism...in its commitment to the status quo. The approval it enjoins seems to be absolute, leaving no room for judgment... [;] one cannot be indifferent toward other ways of life – it obligates us to approve what others do. The Boasian relativist is placed in the morally awkward position of endorsing the infant’s starvation, the rape of abducted women, the massacre of whole villages” (Hatch, [1983](#), p. 371). An attempt to produce an objective, universal response to these moral and ethical quandaries, particularly in an era in which imperialism is viewed with general hostility, is fraught with difficulty and controversy. At present, a series of issues to be resolved, rather than answers, stand out.

Firstly, there needs to be serious further examination of the nature and purpose of culture. Evaluating culture presumes that culture has an innate purpose or meaningful role. The many functionalist (e.g., Malinowski, [1944](#)), structuralist (e.g., Lévi-Strauss, [1963](#)), symbolic (e.g., Geertz, [2000](#)), and constructivist (e.g., Latour & Woolgar, [1986](#)) accounts of culture each offer different positions in this respect. In general, it seems sensible to assume that culture performs a range of functions in various parts of life and that, particularly in modern societies, people are subject to a range of cultural traditions across their lives. Evaluating one part of culture may or may not require a different set of standards than evaluating another. Often, as in culturalist approaches, culture is associated with identity (see Galeotti, [2002](#)), such that objections to cross-cultural judgment are grounded in opposition to assessments of practices and beliefs with which individuals or groups identify. In this vein, distinctions are often made between culture and religion, such that criticisms of a practice such as female genital mutilation are often leveled at the “cultural” traditions of particular Islamic or Christian groups, rather than their “true” faiths. In this sense, it is important to

consider whether the subject of evaluation is a culture, society, or life or group of lives, since the use of each of these terms is flexible and seldom uniform. It seems reasonable to suggest that a form of evaluation aimed at analyzing societies needs to adopt a holistic account of culture, grounded, perhaps, in assessing the basic structure of society, as Rawls ( [1971](#), p. 7) put it. This would mean an analysis of the functioning of the various social institutions which, together, sustain a given society. Further thought, then, must go into determining the agency of individuals within that society with regard to the influence of culture on their beliefs, behavior, and outcomes.

Secondly, there must be agreement on the dependent variable to be studied – that is, the end or good for which the culture is responsible. There are, potentially, deontological (right-based) and perfectionist (good-based) pathways here. A deontological position might, for example, employ the conceptions of justice in Rawls ( [1971](#)) or Kukathas ( [2003](#)) to evaluate the extent to which culture promote respect for persons by protecting, in Kukathas' approach, freedom of conscience and association. Of greater relevance to this encyclopedia are perfectionist approaches grounded in eudaimonic accounts of human well-being. There is, of course, an extremely large number of conceptions of the good and understandings of the content of well-being. The deployment of such conceptions in deleterious interventions in non-Western societies has, as discussed above, led many critical anthropologists to suggest that the notion of [well-being](#) as a universal concept is dangerous and flawed. While this gives reason for caution, it need not preclude the identification of goods of fundamental importance to human beings. Attempts to ground such goods empirically in cross-cultural surveys are often subject to refutation on the grounds of their absence in particularly diverse societies (see Douglas, [2003](#), p. xxxvii). Rationalist attempts to identify fundamental goods may be less vulnerable, given that there is an assumption that human and cultural understandings of objective interests are fallible.

Approaches which combine rationalism with a multiply realizable understanding of human well-being, in which the good is seen to take different forms in different people and contexts, may also avoid elements of claims of ethnocentricity due to the capacity to affirm apparently divergent societies. [Flourishing](#), which is derived from the Aristotelian concept of living and doing well, has been seen to be preferable to [utility](#) or [happiness](#) by the likes of John Gray ( [1997](#), pp. 55–60) as it is potentially more attentive to the diverse ways in which people appear to realize [well-being](#). There have been numerous attempts to advance objective, universal conceptions of well-being or flourishing in recent years: Gray has sought to draw upon value pluralism in affirming a range of diverse cultural forms while criticizing fundamentalist tendencies in neoliberal societies; Martha Nussbaum ( [2011](#)) has sought to combine a thick vague conception of the good with a form of political liberalism in her capabilities approach, while John Finnis ( [2011](#)) has revised neo-Thomist principle to advance a modern defense of natural law. These accounts provide scope to understand, in their diverse incarnations, the constituent elements of human well-being, enabling an objective defense of cultural forms which would otherwise, in relativist and culturalist schemes, be regarded with indifference or affirmation according to authenticity.

The third issue concerns the way in which and the extent to which culture can promote [well-being](#). It is necessary to understand, conceptually, the goods which a culture can protect, provide, or promote in order for humans to realize the good. Two approaches appear of relevance: needs and [capabilities](#). For Gray ( [1997](#), p. 58) and Max-Neef ( [1991](#)), needs include both physiological goods, such as food and water, and sociopsychological goods, such as meaning, love, and identity. The breadth of goods invoked points toward the derivative formulation of needs (Barry, [1990](#), pp. 47–

49; also Max-Neef, [1991](#), pp. 17–18). Any good can be a need so long as it is presented in conjunction with an “in order to” clause denoting the achievement of some end (Barry [1990](#), p. lxxv). That is,  $x$  is only a need when it is necessary to satisfy, achieve, or realize  $y$ . The good and the end may be of completely different moral standing. One means of dealing with different needs is outlined by Barry ([1990](#), p. 49), who distinguishes normatively invocations of need into genuine needs of the sort associated with the sustenance of life and more superficial, secondary wants or goods associated with individual choice. This is because the former “constitute objectively identifiable ingredients of human well-being” which are extremely resistant to claims of cultural construction and which are of more direct and immediate importance to human well-being (Jones, [1994](#), p. 149).

Needs approaches have, though, been criticized as philosophically underdeveloped, insufficiently comprehensive, and focused solely on raising individuals to the level of subsistence (Sen, [1984](#), pp. 513–515). Capabilities approaches argue that, rather than merely providing goods, societies should create conditions for the realization of immanent human qualities and capacities by which to achieve flourishing. Nussbaum has sought to develop a conception of human [flourishing](#) which is sensitive to cultural diversity and derived from human potential. She identifies a series of innate human [capabilities](#) for such things as bodily integrity, emotions, practical reason, control over their environment, and play, which can be realized in different ways in different societies (Nussbaum, [2011](#), pp. 33–34). When developed into functions, these capabilities enable humans to flourish. The ability of humans to develop these functions depends upon the provision by societies of particular resources, entitlements, and liberties. Societies which inflict constraints on, say, bodily integrity through genital mutilation, or which prevent individuals from developing meaningful relationships with others, inhibit the ability of people to flourish (Nussbaum [2000](#), p. 215). However, this approach may be seen excessively to favor liberal societies and fail to accommodate the ranking of goods seen in certain needs approaches by regarding each capability as being of equal worth.

Having determined which conceptual approach provides the most effective scope for evaluation, it is necessary to consider issues of distributive justice. There are two key approaches: firstly, sufficientarian approaches seek to provide a sufficient or ample amount of goods by which individuals can achieve certain ends (Nussbaum, [2011](#), p. 41); secondly, egalitarian approaches regard political, economic, and social equality as being essential, morally, in order to recognize the fundamental worth of human beings and, instrumentally, in order to avoid, for example, the loss of (self-)esteem in hierarchical societies among the impoverished (Wilde, Forthcoming 2012). Here, there is a conflict between liberal approaches which emphasize political equality and the priority of [liberty](#) and Marxist approaches which believe that inequalities in resources lead to harmful political and social inequalities, justifying constraints on liberty in order to promote [well-being](#).

Fourthly, it is necessary to consider the extent to which culture can be held responsible for the [well-being](#) of individuals. There may be many different factors which affect the good, the most influential of which we might, with Gray, term “circumstance.” The realist assumption, to which Rorty makes concessions through his acceptance of certain Darwinian tenets (see Rorty, [1991a](#), p. 12 above), is that the environment is, to some extent, independently determinate. Humans cannot simply talk volcanoes or hurricanes out of existence, no matter which words or meanings they employ. Nor can societies dispense with age-old means of engaging technologically with the environment to satisfy needs, without developing alternative modes of production. Moreover,

intergroup relationships may be beyond the control of particular groups, since a rival group may decide, for instance, to invade on a whim. It may not always be possible to hold culture responsible for such events. To criticize culture on the basis of the [quality of life](#) of a society's members without reference to independent variables such as the various constituents of circumstance seems rash. It might, however, be reasonable to hold culture responsible for the way in which a society anticipates or responds to circumstance. This requires that humans understand accurately, rather than construct meaningfully, the various processes of the natural and social world. In order, say, to satisfy biological needs, it is necessary to shape culture in a manner which recognizes and responds effectively to the nuances, dynamics, and contingencies of the environment. Without successful engagement with the environment, we are unable to feed, water, and shelter ourselves or, even, to develop the goods by which to develop capabilities. In this sense, it may be possible to argue that societies face the same broad challenges wherever they are but that the particular forms of cultural organization required to achieve these ends will differ from circumstance to circumstance. This implies the importance of some degree of philosophical particularism to a holistic rubric of evaluation.

Finally, it is important to consider whose [well-being](#) should be of importance in evaluating a culture. If culture is judged solely by the extent to which, in a given circumstance, it affects the [well-being](#) of those regarded as group members, there is the possibility that the assessment will affirm that culture which promotes enslavement or expropriation of the resources of other peoples. Given the potential universalistic motivations of attempts to evaluate culture, such an assessment would seem perverse. Logically, it seems beneficial, therefore, to evaluate culture according to its impacts on the [well-being](#) of *all* affected individuals – whether or not they are seen to identify with culture under evaluation. Contra culturalism, this analysis need not be biased against cultures or cultural practices motivated by, or endowed with, expansionist tendencies. The mere fact that a culture contains imperialistic or narcissistic tendencies does not mean that it will expand or that that expansion need necessarily be deleterious. The Roman and Ottoman Empires, for example, were instrumental in bringing periods of affluence and stability to territories which may otherwise have been fractious. Conversely, as the case of North Korea demonstrates, the mere fact that a culture rejects expansionism does not mean that it will affect positively the well-being of members or that its isolationism will not affect the well-being of nonmembers. These examples seem to suggest that evaluations based solely or largely on the intentions, rather than the outcomes, of culture may lead to perverse conclusions. By evaluating culture according to the [well-being](#) of all those affected by their activities, it may also be possible to deal with potential analytical problems regarding the cultural unit. It means that it is not necessary to regard culture as distinct or homogenous or attempt to map culture onto particular figurations of individuals. It is possible, instead, to assess the outcomes of particular cultural forms – for example, particular ways of producing goods, distributing property, or organizing family structures – accepting that individuals, especially in the modern world, are often subject to practices with different origins and trajectories within the various spheres of their lives.

## [Cross-References](#)

[Basic Needs](#)

[Capabilities](#)

Cross-Cultural Comparison

Cultural Diversity

Cultural Values

Deontology

Egalitarianism

Eudaimonic Well-being

Family Structure

Flourishing

Human Needs

Liberalism

Liberty

Quality of Life (QoL)

Utilitarianism

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