

# CROSS-CULTURAL UNIVERSALS OR CULTURAL RELATIVISM?

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G.E.R. Lloyd, *Cognitive Variations. Reflections on the Unity and Diversity of the Human Mind*, Oxford. Clarendon Press 2007, pp. 202.

An intense debate persists between universalists, that is the supporters of the existence of a common human nature and of cross-cultural universals in the domain of perception and in some operations of human mind, and relativists, who emphasize the relativity of cultures. The former (an obvious example is Chomski) assume that there are communalities, that function as limits to human variability, while the latter assume that the canons of rationality vary with the cultures and are specific to each society, so that this variation produces different ways in which the mind works and different ontologies. When the viewpoints of different cultures, but also of groups or individuals, are compared, what prevails is the diversity. In the so-called continental philosophy, particularly both in Germany and Italy, this relativistic thesis has been expressed above all within the tradition of thought labelled 'historicism', which insists not only on the differences between synchronic cultures and societies, but also on the temporal differences within the same culture, particularly Western culture. Sometime the difference is interpreted as an incommensurability. The debate has been very hot, because the different viewpoints seem to entail conflicting ideologies. But paradoxically, both viewpoints can function as an antidote to racism, even if in different ways. For, in the universalists' view, if all men share one common nature, no one can pretend a natural superiority on the others, and according to the relativists, if each culture and each society differs from the others, each one has its rights and no one can pretend to have any superiority. Conversely, both viewpoints can be interpreted also as a support to the inequality of men, because the theory of the existence of cross-cultural universals can be considered as an imperialist extension of categories which in fact are construed by the Western culture, while the relativism can be charged of sustaining the equivalence of all viewpoints, even of racist ones.

The rationale of Lloyd's book is to resist these global theses and perspectives, because in his opinion neither an unqualified relativism, nor an unqualified universalism are satisfactory. Habitually, universalism and relativism are con-

sidered as two exhaustive alternatives, incompatible and mutually exclusive, but that is deceptive. In Lloyd's view the whole truth does not lie with one party or with the other, but this bland observation must be qualified. The radical opposition between the two viewpoints depends on the fact that sometimes each one takes into account exclusively some discipline, generalizing its results and transforming them in unquestioned axioms. It can be biology or neurophysiology for the universalists, or anthropology, sociology and history for the relativists. Consequently, Lloyd's strategy has at its core a cross-disciplinary analysis of some problems, which allows to specify how far the communalities extend, and which they are, and how diversity begins to take effect. For example, the differences we discern in belief systems, do they merely reflect differences in the content of thought or in the way in which we think too? And as for the universals, are they constraints and determining factors or merely influential ones, from which it is possible to break free? These are the questions in which Lloyd's book engages. For achieving some answers it is essential to tackle specific issues.

Those ones discussed by Lloyd are colour perception, spatial cognition, classification of animals and plants, emotions, health and well-being, the self, agency and causation, the opposition between nature and culture, and the canons of rationality. But the analysis of these topics must assume not a monodisciplinary, but a cross-disciplinary approach, in order to show how the provisional results reached in each discipline interact and must be weighed against each other, and how the conclusions on the controversy between unity and diversity, or between universalists and cultural relativists will vary in each case. So there is no reason to think that biological, neurophysiological and biochemical processes are not common to all humans, even if they exhibit some variations, as well as the variations between different individuals and populations, that can be elucidated only by empirical investigations. Therefore, the different relevance of neurophysiology and biochemistry takes a different form when concerning the study of emotions or of spatial cognition or of colour perception. On the other side, linguistic, cultural, social and political factors that influence belief systems are particularly relevant where evaluative judgements are involved and history provides crucial rich evidence for the possibility of difference and variation, on fundamental issues, also within a single culture. But if we consider what belief systems are belief about, namely not raw-physical data, which are mediated by more or less theory-laden language, but the representations of physical phenomena, such as colours or animal kinds, we can ascertain an input of some kind from the side of what is represented and these representations are not the product solely of the imagination. This is what Lloyd calls the

multidimensionality of the phenomena, linked to different possible modes or styles of enquiry, which enlighten different levels of universality and diversity. For example, in the case of colour perception, there are physical objective data, ascertained by measurements of wavelengths; but the problem is the translation into some colour vocabulary, for here we have variations, even if the peculiarities to one particular language are not arbitrary. That means that colour perception is a multidimensional phenomenon.

Also the case of natural kinds of animals and plants shows that neither pure cultural relativism, nor pure cross-cultural universals, will do. The relativist will emphasize the different forms of classification, which corresponds to certain cultural and ecological interests and to different symbolic systems. And actually also the biology shows that no one definite taxonomy is within reach, but that does not justify a purely relativist claim that any classification is as good as any other. The prior question is instead which criterion, or set of them, to apply. On this point, Lloyd argues that there is no evidence that our cognitive equipment as such varies in any significant way and to that extent a thesis concerning the psychic unity of the humans is plausible enough. The recognition of biological kinds has been essential for survival and some forms of classification seem to be a constant in human societies, even if their contents vary to a remarkable degree. But what is more important is that even within a single culture these forms vary and are submitted to revisions. This confirms the complexity and multidimensionality of the phenomenon and the plasticity of the human mind, which is capable of revising the assumptions of the society the humans belong to.

As for the emotions, we have not yet reached a synthesis of results from biology, developmental psychology, social anthropology, linguistics. The overall structure of our brains is almost sure, as it is sure the cultural diversity of languages used for describing emotions. The plasticity of human cognitive structures allows for different patterns of development, but the way in which the patterns will be developed differs between different groups. Are there basic emotions that are universal, apart from the divergences in the surface vocabulary for describing them? The most favourite candidates – fear and aggression – correspond to what are believed to be part of our evolutionary inheritance, being in fact feelings that were needed in the struggle for survival in competition with other species of animals, as it seems confirmed by ethological researches. But also these basic cross-cultural universals become socially incorporated and the modalities of acculturation vary with the society. In England laughter is assumed as always expressing joy, but in Japan it may also indicate embarrassment. Surely the emotions vary, but the common

biology that underpins them cannot be ignored. The emotions so labelled are never merely imaginary or arbitrary or totally absent in certain groups and their vocabularies are, partially at least, inter-translatable. And the same holds in the cases of health and well-being, where we have a mixture of communalities and relativities as in emotions. It is not always easy to fix the boundaries between the cross-cultural universals and the culturally relative and a relativist could affirm that the notions of health and well-being are socially constructed and differently perceived in each culture. But we can assume that there is one feature in common, beyond the diversity, that is a positive evaluation of health and well-being and, I would add, of any satisfaction of human needs, such as hunger etc., independently from the level that defines them and from the ways in which they are perceived. Obviously, each culture varies in defining what are the needs, but it is difficult to exclude that there are some basic needs and that all societies have some notion of values, about what is to be preferred and what is to be avoided, independently from their specific contents.

At this point it is necessary to discuss also the general dichotomy that underlies the whole analysis, that is the dichotomy or the opposition of nature and culture. We can assume that nature corresponds to universality and culture to relativity, but Lloyd asks: is this dichotomy, in its turn, universal, common to all societies and cultures, or is it culturally and historically relative and a typical example of the imposition of Western categories? In certain cultures the dichotomy is implicit, as in the myths interpreted by Lévi-Strauss, which display an opposition between the raw and the cooked, and in any case the absence of an explicit concept of nature cannot be confused with its negation. On the other side, according to some primatologists, even certain animal species have culture. We know that this dichotomy originated explicitly in Greece in a polemical context, where nature frequently, but not always, represented the positive pole. But in other periods of Western culture it was nature that has been considered the negative pole, necessarily inferior to the mind. Hegel is a typical representative of this view. Therefore, even within the so-called Western culture nature and culture have been differently weighed in terms of relative value. Lloyd's view is that the evidence seems to tell against there being any innate apprehension of the domain of nature as such. On the other hand, the acquisition of some notion of culture or society would appear to be the inevitable result of any process of social incorporation, hence universal, as it is clear from the contrast between 'us' and 'them', which seems present in all cultures.. It may seem paradoxical that some idea of collectivity is universal, whereas the concept of nature is highly society-specific. This confirms the multidimensionality of the concept of nature, which is not a value-neutral concept,

but is a concept both descriptive and normative, evoked in many cases in the course of Western history in support both of the inequality among men, as in Aristotle for example, and of the natural rights of all men, i.e. as a way of introducing value-judgements, and in fact a matter of ideology.

Lloyd is conscious of presenting a selective survey of issues, but thinks that on the basis of the evidence collected it can be refuted the view that what is common in human cognitive faculties falls to the side of biology or neuropsychology, while diversity is a matter of culture. In fact there are also biological and neurological diversities, while among the commonalities, on the other hand, not only biological data are included, but also the fact that all men become socially acculturated and have the capacity to learn a language, to acquire a spatial frame of reference, though not necessarily the same, and adopt or modify the values of the group to which they belong, although their values are far from uniform. It is therefore very problematic to adopt categories such as Asiatics, Westerners and so on, on the basis of a presumed diversity of the respective cognitive capacities, that is in terms of rationality. It is essential to explicit and distinguish the different criteria by which skills in reasoning may be evaluated. The canons of formal logic are only one type, but we must take into account also the pragmatics of intercommunicative exchange, that is the skill we employ in the practical reasoning in real life. Our basic membership of the same human species, a matter of our genetic make up, is as undeniable as our individual diversity and creativity. The relativist must make room for those latter common factors, just as the universalist cannot afford to ignore diversity. Our great diversity is perfectly compatible with our shared humanity.

Lloyd reaches this more comprehensive perspective on the question of universality and relativity also because he can exploit in this book his prolonged fruitful researches on ancient Greek and Chinese thought, particularly on their science, their ways of enquiry and scientific practices and their relationships with their societies (see Lloyd 2002, 2004, 2005, 2009 and Lloyd-Sivin 2002). The study of past civilisations not only shows how culture and language influence thought, but also teaches us that we can find in them divergent views expressed in the same language by different members of the same society at the same time and in different times. The consideration of both ancient Greek and Chinese complex cultures allows to widen the range of possibilities, showing that they were not prisoners of their natural languages and were capable of developing alternative theories in many fields. For example, they were not limited to a single view of the emotions by their languages or their culture. Chinese thought confirms that the capacity of modifying and transcending received opinions is not an exclusive property of the Western tradition and

perhaps it is one of the communalities Lloyd detects under the diversity of cultures. The tension between universalists and relativists lessens thanks also to the comparative analysis of Greek and Chinese thought. In my opinion, the principal result of Lloyd's analysis consists in the dissolution of both a confusion between diversity and incommensurability and an ontological stiffening of the diversity, as if diversities were not capable themselves of modifications, as the history both of Western and Chinese culture shows. Cultures are neither ontologically closed within themselves nor deprived of relationships with the external world. Communalities and general capacities and schemes, even if endowed with culturally and historically variable contents, allow the communication between cultures. The fact that some items of a certain language cannot be translated in other ones of another language does not imply that all items of a language cannot. The communication can be not immediately transparent, but as in the practical reasoning of real life eventual errors in the interpretation of linguistic utterances and of written texts can be corrected and at least a certain degree of mutual understanding is laboriously and gradually achieved, so it is in a pragmatics of cross-cultural communication. But this is the task of not only single individuals, but of collective enterprises in the course of time, and the comparison between cultures, even ancient cultures, contributes to this enterprise.

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