

Universalism and (Cultural) Relativism

I. Introduction

[1] A human right is a right that belongs to every human being merely by virtue of being human. Whether one has the right does not depend on attributes like one's religion, sex or race or the level of economic development of one's society, its culture or system of government. Hence, it is uncontroversial that the concept of a human right contains a claim about universality, namely a claim about rights that *all* humans have. It is controversial, however, whether anything falls under the concept – thus, whether there really are any universal human rights.

[2] Universalism about human rights is the claim that some universal human rights, as defined above, exist. However, universalists disagree over what exactly belongs to the extension of the concept. What concrete rights should figure on the list

of universal human rights? This entry is primarily concerned with universalism regarding the → United Nations (UN) list of human rights which we will roughly stipulate to be the joint list of the rights found in the → Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), → International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and → International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). But universalists of various kinds defend lists that extend and/or abridge the UN list.

[3] The cultural relativist maintains that there are no universal human rights. From the relativist's perspective, the normative force of rights does not derive from a common human nature. Rights, rather, are always relative to some cultural framework in the shape of basic cultural beliefs, norms and values. I may have rights but, if so, it will be because of my belonging to a culture that accepts norms and values from which these rights stem, not merely due to my sharing in a common human nature. Crucially, there are, according to the relativist, different cultural frameworks that contain mutually inconsistent basic beliefs with no rational way of settling basic disagreements between them. Consequently, there is no supra-cultural viewpoint from which one can criticize the norms and values of any given culture. All cultural frameworks are of equal worth.

[4] This entry discusses, first of all, how a universalist account of human rights can be understood and explained. In what sense can human rights be said to be universal? How do we get from the abstract concept of a universal human right to a claim about a concrete list of human rights such as the UN list? And how can modern human rights be defended in cultures where the human rights norms are initially alien (the problem of ethnocentricity)? Then, focus turns to the cultural relativist's opposing view. How can it be argued that there are no universal rights? The central relativist argument from the existence of irresolvable value disagreement between cultures is analyzed and a range of possible universalist responses is discussed. Finally, conclusions are drawn.

II. Universalism about human rights (→ Human Rights Scepticism)

[5] What is meant by the claim that human rights are universal? One way to understand it, reminiscent of → legal positivism, is to see the universality of human rights as consisting in the fact that they are enacted in legal systems across the world. However, this is, first, an empirically false claim. Far from all

governments have signed and ratified the core UN conventions and even those that have often fail to live up to them. And, secondly, this way of understanding universality turns it into a highly contingent fact that human rights are universal. Many cultural, religious and political groups across the world do not accept core parts of the UN list of rights, and developments in the politics of individual countries can quickly change the degree of compliance with human rights in actual law. *Actual* universal acceptance and enactment of legal rights cannot be what is meant by the universality of human rights since we conceptually understand that one can have a human right even in the situation where this right is not enacted in law.

[6] A second way of making sense of the universality of human rights focuses on the alleged existence of a deeper cross-cultural *moral* consensus supporting the central human rights norms. The universality of human rights is, according to this proposal, based on an alleged converging support for the human rights norms in the historically dominant moral, political, philosophical or religious cultures of the world. For instance, it is sometimes argued that we can find acceptance of the norms of equality, liberty and political representation in major religious and philosophical traditions from all corners of the world. The trouble with this way of understanding the universality of human rights is, again, that this empirical claim is false. Some large religions contain norms that directly contradict egalitarian conceptions of man and other central human rights norms. Hinduism, with its concept of a caste system, for instance, is a case in point. More importantly, whereas it is true that there are precursors to the various modern human rights norms in most cultures (Sen [1997]; id. [2006]), these precursors are far from identical to modern human rights on a closer look. The notion of equality of all humans before God found in many religions, for instance, is not identical to the modern human rights notion of equality for all human individuals as is illustrated by the fact that it is a stretch to claim that one can find acceptance of the modern norms of gender equality in the main patriarchal religions. Moreover, the core modern concept of human rights as universal individual legal entitlements protecting against state oppression was developed first and foremost in European liberal political culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is not part of the legacy of most other political cultures of the world (Langlois [2009]).

[7] The universality of modern human rights therefore cannot be based on an existing universal

consensus, whether current or historical, since there is no such consensus. That being said, cultural precursors *can* play a more practical role in gaining acceptance of human rights norms across cultures (see below para 15).

1. *Universalism and the moral conception of human rights*

[8] The first two approaches to understanding the universality of human rights arguably go wrong at a fundamental level. Universalism about human rights is not a descriptive thesis about an existing universal consensus. It is a *normative* claim about what rights ought to be respected always and everywhere. A claim that we, according to the universalist, *ought* to agree with. In fact, the wording of the preamble to UDHR hints at this when it notes that ‘the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights’ or when it ‘[recognizes] the inherent dignity and [. . .] the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family’. The idea expressed here is not that human rights comes into existence because there happens to be a universal consensus about them. It is the other way around. There ought to be a consensus on these rights, since they are independent normative truths, and this is what the peoples of the world *recognize* when they sign up to the UDHR. It is not wrong to → torture because we agree that it is wrong to torture. We (hopefully) agree that it is wrong to torture because it *is* wrong to torture. The basis of the universality of human rights thus, according to this more plausible normative interpretation, lies in their universal normative standing independent of existing law. In this section, we look at attempts to base human rights directly on normative moral values but later we look at other normative accounts based on political reasoning.

[9] This normative conception is typically accompanied by the corresponding epistemic claim that we can *discover* these rights. And their discovery must be achieved through moral or other normative reasoning, not descriptive surveys of actual cultures now or in the past. Thus, the normative conception implicitly involves a claim about the universal *epistemic availability* of justifications for human rights (notice that this is a different universality claim from the claim that some rights apply to all humans). The view can, for instance, be that human rights are rights that all human beings, if they engage rationally with the issue in a process of empirically well-informed, free and unbiased moral reasoning, would agree are of special importance.

[10] There are several important consequences of understanding the universality of human rights as founded in universal and knowable moral values. First of all, it opens the possibility of there being a difference between what is actually accepted as human rights and the *true* list of rights, i.e. the list based on our best moral thinking. This gives human rights critical bite by giving them a status that potentially transcends both the positive legal order of the day (including the UN list of rights) and the moral norms of any existing culture. It frees us from the problematic idea that human rights are whatever enough of us happen to agree on that threatens to diminish the status and importance normally attached to human rights.

[11] Secondly, the basis in independent moral thinking offers a solution to the problem of the indeterminateness of the concept of a human right (Griffin [2008]). Any fully fledged account of universal human rights must develop the content of the concept beyond the highly indeterminate content of the phrase ‘those rights that belong to humans merely in virtue of being human’. There must, it can be argued, be some account of why exactly those rights that appear on the UN list of human rights should be on that list. A popular attempt to give more content to the concept focuses on the notion that all humans share in a certain ‘inherent dignity’, as we saw above in the UDHR quote (→ Human Dignity). Being human means having a certain inherent dignity which in turn is something that ought always to be protected by legal rights. But again, the road from this, otherwise intuitively suggestive, concept to a concrete list of rights is not clear (though see Waldron [2015]).

[12] Traditions of moral thinking, on the other hand, offer more precise and principled roads from the concept to a list of rights. One prominent tradition believes that human rights are founded on the normative importance of the special human capability of normative agency. (Griffin [2008]). Rival moral traditions focus on the fact that human beings share certain basic needs or interests (Renzo [2015]) or on the importance of basic human capabilities (Nussbaum [1997]; id. [2000]), but there are many other moral accounts on offer (Nickel [2019]). All these moral accounts offer an infusion of concrete content into the concept of a human right through reference to universal *moral* values. And such moral thinkers, while typically supporting most rights on the UN list, also provide a degree of criticism of individual rights on the list arguing that some should be left out and others should be added, just as they provide more precise accounts of who exactly is included as human.

2. *Universalism and the problem of ethnocentricity*

[13] The view that bases human rights on universal moral values thus has an advantage when it comes to making sense of the deeper content and critical role of human rights. However, it also faces a difficult challenge in the shape of the *problem of the ethnocentricity* of human rights (Griffin [2008] at 137; Caney and Jones [2001]). If human rights derive from independently existing moral values that we can discover rationally, then the possibility emerges that some cultures may not yet have discovered these values or even have the concepts required to consider them. As remarked earlier, the UN list of rights embodies a concept of rights that was first developed in the Enlightenment period of European culture, and it reflects the high valuation of autonomy and individualism of that culture. The list is not always an easy sell in non-Western cultures as the famous debate about → Asian values may illustrate. Many cultures and political groups that exist in the world today accept norms that are far from congenial to modern human rights. The ambition to spread a Western conception of rights, with its focus on, among other things, strong protection of individual autonomy and secularism, across all cultures of the world can even be seen as a new round of pernicious Western cultural imperialism.

[14] The moral universalist can face this challenge in two ways: One option is to insist on retaining the modern Western formulation of human rights while still maintaining that future global acceptance of the modern conception of human rights can be achieved. The fact that it happened to be formulated in Western culture first, the argument goes, has no bearing on its claim to universal validity. Humans are, according to this line of reasoning, able through informed, free and unbiased moral reflection to put their ancestral culture behind them and connect with the universally available epistemic justifications for human rights mentioned above. In support of this approach one can point to the fact that human rights terminology has undeniably gained support and use in many non-Western cultures today (although sometimes only in dissident elites). The universalist can further draw cause for optimism from looking at the history of Western culture itself. Cultures are not static monoliths but diverse and dynamic entities. Historically, Western culture has contained many elements that are inimical to human rights. After all, it fostered some of the worst human rights crimes in history like the

Inquisition, → colonialism, the slave trade (→ Slavery), the witch hunts and the Holocaust. And Western culture still contains significant racist and sexist subcultures. Yet, Western moral culture has developed considerably and today acceptance of human rights is considered mainstream. So, cultures are dynamic entities that can change their values over time as Western culture has done and is still in the process of doing. It is the hope of the hardliner that non-Western cultures can develop in the same way and end up accepting human rights and their justification as they were originally formulated in Western liberal culture (Langlois [2009]).

[15] However, this hard line invites the objection that it is unrealistic to hope for such convergence on a Western-inspired conception of human rights in a world of radically diverse values and beliefs (Donnelly [2007] at 293). A softer line on answering the ethnocentricity challenge suggests instead that consensus on human rights across cultures can be achieved by looking for counterpart or precursor formulations in non-Western cultures of the values that back human rights in Western culture. The hope is that it is possible to translate the Western justification of human rights into the vocabulary of non-Western cultures. Such counterpart formulations, it is often claimed, can be found in many non-Western cultures (Sen [1997]; id. [2006]; Bauer and Bell [1999]). Of course, one can with some plausibility question whether this translation can succeed for all modern human rights in all cultures.

3. *Universalism and political conceptions of human rights*

[16] The problem of ethnocentrism has, however, been seen by many thinkers as a decisive reason to abandon the project of basing universal human rights on substantive moral values altogether. They develop instead a substantive normative conception of human rights based on a *political* approach (Rawls [1999]; Raz [2010]; Etinson [2018]). Instead of hoping, unrealistically, for cross-cultural convergence on a substantive moral foundation of human rights, they believe that we should develop a conception of universal human rights that focuses on the role that human rights can and should play in an international system of states with diverse cultures. They aim to derive a conception of human rights from a wider theory about the kind of international political arrangement that can be agreed on across cultures while factoring in the fact of cultural value diversity from the outset.

[17] Political conceptions of human rights, thus, instead of starting from moral-philosophical reasoning about substantive values, begin with considerations about the conceptual and practical possibility of sustaining an international system of justice. A prominent defender of this approach, John Rawls, has argued that a set of universal human rights will emerge from a process where the 'well-ordered' peoples of the world under ideal egalitarian conditions negotiate a contract to create a 'law of peoples'. His approach can be seen as an attempt to tackle the problem of ethnocentricity head on by stipulating that when representatives from the different peoples negotiate the hypothetical contract, they are not allowed to argue based on the ethnocentric values of their own religious, metaphysical or moral culture. They can only appeal to 'public reasons', i.e. reasons acceptable to all the representatives of the peoples of the world no matter what their cultural background is. What emerges from the negotiation is an 'overlapping consensus' on, among other things, a set of universal human rights. The consensus is thus 'political', based on public reason, rather than based on 'comprehensive' culture-specific moral, philosophical or religious ideas (Rawls [1999]; Brock [2009]).

[18] The political approach, thus, deals very directly with the problem of ethnocentricity and this promises to result in a list of human rights for which broad support across the world's cultures can realistically be secured. The downside of this approach is that it tends to lead to a very revisionary account of human rights that fails to underpin the existing common understanding of human rights. The list of rights that emerge from Rawls' overlapping consensus, for instance, is much shorter than the UN list. It omits several core human rights like the right to → freedom of expression and → association and the right to democratic participation (→ Elections and Governments, Right to Participate in). That is, exactly those rights that peoples from non-liberal cultures would tend not to accept. In effect, Rawls' conception advocates tolerance towards regimes that we normally would count as human rights' violators. It is difficult to see Rawls' list as a list of human rights at all in the way that the term is commonly used in international law. Furthermore, the role of human rights on Rawls' account becomes more limited than normally envisaged. A right can only be a human right on this account, if breach of the right justifies the overruling of state → sovereignty as it happens in military or other intervention by one state in another. This is a much

narrower role for human rights than on the common understanding according to which human rights can play a more general critical role and, for instance, be used by citizens to challenge the legitimacy of their own domestic regime and institutions (for discussion see Raz [2010]; Waldron [2018]).

[19] A final important cause for scepticism is that an overlapping consensus will lead to members of different cultures having different justifications for supporting human rights, each finding justification from within their own comprehensive views with no guarantee that this justification has a counterpart in the views in other cultures. It can be feared that such a consensus becomes shallow and fragile, even threatening to deteriorate into mere agreement on the wording of the rights but not their deeper content, including the principles for adjudicating conflicts of rights. Though, of course, a shallow overlapping consensus on international law may in practical terms be better than no consensus at all.

[20] However, other variants of the political approach to human rights that underpin something closer to the mainstream UN list of human rights and understanding of their role can arguably be defended. Charles Beitz, for instance, argues that human rights are political norms *sui generis* with no need to be underpinned by moral values. He develops an account of human rights as 'constitutive norms of a global practice whose aim is to protect individuals against threats to their most important interests arising from the acts and omissions of their governments' ([2009] at 197), thereby ending up sanctioning something like the UN list of rights. Versions of the political conception of human rights can, thus, form an alternative to the moral account discussed above – an account that is in its own way normative and substantive and able to give sense to the claim that human rights are universal.

III. Cultural relativism about human rights

[21] The cultural relativist denies that universal human rights exist and believes that rights are always relative to a cultural framework. Furthermore, there is a plurality of cultural frameworks and they diverge in ways that cannot be resolved rationally. Human rights norms are, thus, only valid within a cultural framework where they are already accepted and there may exist cultural frameworks where such acceptance is not present. In particular, the modern idea of human rights originates in and primarily belongs to the cultural

framework of Western culture, and it may not resonate, at least not in full, with cultural frameworks in other parts of the world.

[22] Traditionally, critics have argued that the relativist position is a non-starter. Relativism is accused of being self-defeating. If truths are always relative, then the relativist's position itself can only be relatively true which amounts, the thought is, to self-defeat. However, this objection does not have bite when the relativist's claim is only partial. The relativist about human rights need not be a relativist about all other areas of discourse. In particular, they can be a relativist about human rights but maintain that metaethics, the discourse (different from moral discourse) wherein the claim about the relativism of human rights is made, is not a relativistic discourse (Caney [2005]).

[23] Another traditional counter to human rights relativism points simply to the morally horrifying consequences of accepting relativism. By accepting relativism, we would have to accept that 'barbaric' cultures, for instance those that practice human sacrifice, are of equal standing with modern human rights-accepting cultures. But that, the argument goes, would be ethically horrifying, so relativism must be false. This argument, however, clearly begs the question against the relativist. By proceeding from the premise that the 'barbaric' culture is ethically horrifying, it is presupposed that the 'barbaric' culture can be evaluated by an outside standard, a standard not relative to a cultural framework, which is exactly what is in contention in the debate between the relativist and the universalist.

[24] In short, there is no quick-fix philosophical rebuttal of relativism about human rights in the offing. A robust counter to the relativist's position must instead proceed by giving a critical assessment of the positive case for relativism, beginning with the question why should we adopt relativism in the first place? Relativism is typically defended by an *argument from irreconcilable disagreement*. The relativist is impressed by the diversity of moral values and norms across cultures and believes that it provides us with reason to adopt a relativist understanding of rights. The best way to construe this argument is as an inference to the best explanation (for a thorough discussion, see Caney [2005]). It starts with the empirical premise that there are apparently irreconcilable value disagreements between cultures. The best explanation of these disagreements, the relativist then claims, is that they are *basic* disagreements in the sense that they stem from differences in the basic value beliefs of the conflicting cultural frameworks.

Hence, there are radically divergent cultural frameworks and cultural relativism is true.

[25] Countering relativism can therefore proceed by showing that there are many other good explanations of the seemingly unsolvable conflicts over human rights between cultures than the relativist's. In general, the universalist can argue that conditions in societies are not always conducive to engaging in the kind of inquiry that leads to moral insights about human rights. In fact, it may be argued that regimes that fail to respect human rights, for instance by not respecting freedom of belief and expression, actively suppress the kind of debate needed to gain the necessary insights. No surprise, then, that human rights are not generally accepted in such societies.

[26] And, importantly, not everyone who professes disagreement with human rights norms is doing so in good faith. Some are representatives of the elites of authoritarian or totalitarian societies with a vested interest in keeping out human rights norms since they challenge the legitimacy of the regimes (this may, for instance, have been the case in the Asian values debate). If you, instead of asking the elites, ask those who are oppressed by the same elites whether they believe in freedom of expression, due process in the courts, freedom of religion etc., it is most likely that you will get a positive answer. In fact, it is difficult to imagine that anyone would reject having their own human rights protected, if protection was genuinely offered to them. In the extreme case, siding with those in a culture that opposes human rights may amount to siding with the abuser (Fricker [2013] at 3).

[27] But there are clearly also apparently deep disagreements over human rights that cannot be put down to protests in bad faith. The relativist alleges that sometimes the irreconcilability of (good faith) disagreement will persist even in the face of the best rational attempts to remove them. It cannot be cleared away by removing false or adding true empirical beliefs or by correcting the logic of either party to the dispute. Such irresolvable disagreement can, the relativist argues, be found in many value debates like the debates over the moral permissibility of → abortion and the status of animals (see also → Animal Rights) or, in the field of human rights, the debates over the importance of individual liberty rights relative to economic and social rights, over freedom of religion or over the → death penalty.

[28] The relativist is, crucially, making a very strong claim by insisting not just that there are normative disputes that have not been settled so far, but that they are *impossible* to settle. Since it is

notoriously difficult to justify a claim that something necessarily does not exist from observations of contingent facts, this is a weakness in the case for relativism. In the opposite corner, the universalist must attempt to show that any cases of apparently irresolvable disagreement about human rights are just appearances that will disappear upon further inquiry. There are at least three possible strategies for making them disappear.

[29] First, apparent differences in norms between different societies may come down to differences in empirical circumstances. It may be a case of the same deep-level norm being applied to different circumstances, such as different societal structures or levels of economic and technological development, creating the false appearance of irresolvable disagreement at the surface, i.e. at the level of derivative norms. This sort of disagreement disappears once the difference in context is made explicit and the common ground on the deep-level norm is uncovered. A society may, for instance, be faced with such momentous economic or health challenges that immediate concern for economic and social rights outweighs concern for establishing liberal freedoms. This may create the appearance that this society's culture is fundamentally opposed to liberal freedoms whereas, in fact, this opposition is merely transiently dependent on the current unlucky circumstances (note, though, that this argument is often used in bad faith by repressive rulers). Likewise, empirical conditions of a society, like the size, the stage of economic development and the level of education of the populace, may determine what type of political system best secures respect for the right to political participation in that society. Apparent disagreements between societies over the implementation of the right to political participation may come down to such contextual differences rather than basic cultural disagreements.

[30] To illustrate this further, the converse is also true. Convergence in the empirical circumstances of societies across the globe can perhaps explain the growing support for the UN list of human rights in the twentieth century. The → globalization of modern markets and states can, thus, explain why a considerable degree of consensus on human rights has been achieved today, since the threats to individual dignity from the market and the state that human rights protect us from have now also been globalized (Donnelly [2007] at 286-7).

[31] Secondly, often cases of apparently irresolvable disagreement are cases of conflicts between rights, for instance liberal freedoms versus economic rights. The focus of these disagreements

is therefore the subtle principles of weighing values against each other and not deep disagreement over what values there are in the first place. Both parties to the dispute may agree on the importance of the values of freedom and subsistence and disagree merely over how they should be weighed against each other in particular circumstances. For instance, in the careful weighing of the liberty rights to → freedom of movement and association against health rights in a pandemic (→ Infectious Diseases) or the weighing of respect for freedom of expression and the right to political participation in the face of growing disinformation threatening informed voting by citizens. In these cases, the disagreement is not deep since both parties to the dispute recognize the value of liberal freedoms, political participation and health, and it is plausible that one party to the dispute gets the subtle weighing wrong in a way that can be resolved by further inquiry.

[32] Finally, some conflicts of values do not even have a singular rational solution. Values underlying an apparently irresolvable human rights dispute may be incommensurable such that they cannot be weighed against each other. Due to this impossibility of weighing, parties to the dispute are allowed to opt for different conclusions about what values should be prioritized in a particular situation. This may appear as an irresolvable disagreement, but in fact there is no disagreement at all. Both disputants ought simply to recognize that the other was permitted in their choice.

[33] Of course, there is no way to refute, once and for all, the relativist's argument from irresolvable disagreement. It must come down to careful discussions of individual cases of apparently irresolvable disagreement. But the above shows that there are several promising strategies for the universalist to adopt.

IV. Conclusion

[34] Universalism and cultural relativism about human rights, we have seen, are logical contradictions with the universalist claiming that *some* universal human rights exist and the relativist holding that no universal rights exist since rights are always relative to a cultural framework. Hence, there is no middle ground to be found between the positions. It further emerged above that both positions have challenging problems. The moral universalist is challenged to deal with the diversity of values in the world and is hampered by the problem of ethnocentricity. The political universalist has an answer to the problem of

ethnocentricity but has other problems with underpinning human rights as we know them. The relativist, on the other hand, is saddled with the difficult task of showing that existing cultural disagreements over human rights are fundamental cultural rifts that will necessarily persist rather than transitory phenomena that will disappear after further discussion, inquiry and cultural development (including the elimination of bad faith protests).

[35] Whereas no reconciliation between the two positions is possible, the discussion of the universalist's struggle with the challenge from cultural diversity has perhaps suggested the possibility of a version of universalism that is more sensitive towards cultural diversity. A final suggestion shall therefore be that a more moderate universalist strategy is able to allay some of the criticism of being morally imperialistic and ethnocentric by becoming more sensitive to the different societal and cultural contexts in which human rights norms must be implemented.

[36] As was seen, sometimes the human rights critique of a society from without may be based on a failure to take into account the cultural and societal context of that society and to consider how universal human rights norms may be implemented in that context. In fact, it is worth noting that the Bangkok Declaration on Human Rights from 1993, often seen as a classical formulation of the idea that Western and Asian values are irreconcilably at odds with each other, is much more careful in its wording by stating that the signatories

[r]ecognise that while human rights are universal in nature, they must be considered in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm-setting, bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds. (para 8)

This can be seen not as a statement of relativism but as a call for cultural sensitivity. And from the above discussion, it seems that the universalist can heed this call without giving up on universalism.

[37] To illustrate this idea, one can point to one already practised way of institutionalizing cultural sensitivity of this sort. The → European Court of Human Rights applies a → 'margin of appreciation' when interpreting the → European Convention on Human Rights in a way that is intended to secure respect for both cultural and other differences between the European democracies and universal human rights. So, for instance, whether a given restriction on the right to free expression is 'necessary in a democratic society' will in some

cases not be decided by the Court but left to the discretion of individual states that, within bounds set by the spirit of the universal rights, are permitted to make decisions depending on the cultural *mores* and circumstances of that society. Of course, there is always the risk that the universal right is watered down or lost completely in the process of making it more sensitive to cultural contexts in this way. But also, it is not given in advance that such a practice cannot be exercised wisely (Føllesdal [2018]). So, whereas there is no hope of reconciling universalism and relativism, on pain of contradiction, there is perhaps hope that the case for universal human rights can be made more culturally sensitive, pre-empting some of the criticism from relativists and anti-imperialists.

[38] Finally, why bother with trying to understand whether human rights are universal or relative in the first place? Why not focus on the practical task of making progress on the ground, by working on support for binding conventions and securing their implementation everywhere, instead of getting embroiled in abstract moral and philosophical disputes? The above discussion shows that the debate over the universality of human rights can have practical importance. Relativist arguments can be used – in good or bad faith – to defend regimes that do not respect human rights by claiming that the rights that are inconvenient to the regimes are just parochial values of Western culture with no universal validity. Understanding the implications of universalism about human rights and engaging with criticism from relativists thus *can* be part of disarming some apologists of abuser regimes. Conversely, philosophical defences of relativism can do the opposite. The work towards securing respect for human rights everywhere cannot always be detached from understanding if, and if so, why, these rights belong to all humans just in virtue of being human.

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