

Transcript of excerpt of a discussion with Noam Chomsky. The topic is cultural and moral relativism and evidence of innate moral values, with reference to Michel Foucault. Date, event and other participants' names are unknown to me. Transcript has very minor edits for clarity and includes some explanatory notes. Transcription by Ken J. Levy - any errors are mine. Excerpt is from a longer video at [Noam Chomsky on Moral Relativism and Michel Foucault](#), retrieved June 19, 2022.

Speaker 1:

The real question is whether you can regard these differences within a framework of progress in the sense that some cultures, or features of cultures, are better than others. I mean, the real question of cultural relativism is whether you think progress implies, as you said, an underlying innate sense, for instance a sense of justice, or whether these cultural choices are wholly arbitrary, with none being better than... I mean, that's the real issue with cultural relativism.

Noam Chomsky:

But, whatever you believe about that, there is a fixed basis, there must be a fixed basis, otherwise you can't acquire culture in the first place. And that fixed basis has to be determinative - narrowly determinative. Now, that fixed basis gives our actual human moral values. Now, if you raise the question about progress - yeah I think there is progress. And I think it's valuable to look at our own history. So - we're not talking about imperialist conquest - our own history shows there is moral progress. And in fact the very examples you give strongly illustrate it: slavery, subjugation of women, repression of homosexuals - all of this was very common, perfectly well accepted in Western culture not very far back. In the case of, say Turing, *[kj] note: Alan Turing, the British war hero whose cryptographic work may have saved the UK from Nazi conquest and who was later prosecuted and tortured for being homosexual* it was fifty years ago. It's all now regarded as completely unacceptable.

I think that's evidence. You know it's not - in discussing human affairs you don't have proofs - we don't understand enough. But I think this is - and there's much more like it - is evidence that somehow, as our own history, culture, develops, we penetrate more deeply into our actual, real, cultural normative values. And we expand the moral sphere in fairly definite ways. These three examples are good illustrations of it. There are plenty of others.

Speaker 2:

I would like to respond to that. Because you see, this is exactly - what you're expressing there is exactly the point of view of the Enlightenment, which is so rejected nowadays in the name of other cultures, because you speak of progress without the whole cultures - and you say this took a long time, etc., etc., and now we look at it as progress. But when you look at other cultures that have not undergone this so-called progress, they will reply to you that your "progress" is actually a regression.

Let me give you an example. Take homosexuality. Suppose there is a sacred book, a religious book, that says that this is a sin. If you allow that sin the community will be destroyed, partly

because to allow that sin is to allow for unreligious behavior and to allow for skepticism and if skepticism spreads the religious culture is going to be destroyed. I have seen that in my own county, in my own life, with the Catholic culture.

Suppose a Muslim doesn't want to see their culture going the same way that the Catholic has in this country, or the Jews or some other sort of more traditional community or the Catholic, whatever remains of them. I mean, what do you say to them? You say "your whole culture should go because homosexuality should be *[kjl note: unclear, but I think he may have said "freeing," meaning "permitted."]*

NC:

No, as a matter of fact I could say the same thing of my own culture. It's a sin in Jewish culture.

Speaker 2:

I know.

NC:

It's a sin in Jewish culture but I wouldn't have asked some Nazi to come along and force it to be abandoned. But I think that in the course of time, in the course of thinking through your own values, these things are overcome. Our own culture's a good example. Homosexuality was considered not a sin; it was considered a pathology, a sickness. Okay, and that's recent. We've come to understand it's not a sickness. And the fact that it was and that you should kill people...

Speaker 2:

Yeah, I know. But you think this understanding is potentially universal, so *[kjl note: unclear, but I think he says something like "it should apply to all cultures."]*

NC:

Potentially universal and I think there are good reasons to believe it because even if you're the most extreme moral relativist you are presupposing universal moral values. And those can be discovered.

In fact in recent years there's even empirical work trying to investigate them across cultures with children and so on. So it's basically a scientific question. And we have good reason to expect that there's going to be an answer. And part of the reason is almost just logic - you can't acquire a culture without having a rich, built-in array of constraints that allow the leap from scattered data to whatever it is that you acquire. I mean that's virtually logic. And I think a look at our own history gives good illustrations.

For example, looking just at the very examples that are given here, it's been a long battle, but over time, in fact the last couple of centuries, there's been a very consistent change. And the change is not without conflict. But it's going in a particular direction. And I think you can even understand the direction. The direction is of more tolerance of variation and more opposition

toward coercion and control. I think that's a very definite tendency. And I think it suggests something pretty strong about what our fundamental moral values are.