“The idea of cultural relativism is nothing but an excuse to violate human rights.” Shirin Ebadi. Cultural relatavism vs universalism.

Cultural Relativism is a theory arguing that each different society follows a different moral code that is created by the majority and that is completely right and acceptable. A moral code is right, not because of any moral reason, but because a specific culture says it is. It is important to understand that Cultural Relativists believe that each group has the right moral code for themselves, even if there are contradictory moral codes in different societies.

It believes that:

* Different societies have different moral codes.
* There is not objective standard of morality that can be used to judge one society better than another
* There is no “universal truth” in ethics.
* The moral code of society determines what behaviour is acceptable within that society
* It is arrogance for us to judge another society’s moral code.

People who believe in universalism argue that if you support the cultural relativism theory then people can decide what is right or wrong by looking simply at what society holds to be true. However a culture can easily have the wrong mindset. For example in South Africa the belief of racial segregation that was clearly wrong.

There are some general rules that societies must have in common because it is necessary to have these rules if society is to function. For example, rules against lying, murder, stealing, etc.

To summarise cultural relativism warns us about the danger of assuming that all our preferences are based upon absolute moral standards. Many of our practices are culturally specific. Eg. Baring your best in public. Is it objectively wrong? Right? It is neither. It is merely a product of our society that we respond in such a way. If we realise that we are products of our culture we are more likely to acknowledge the understanding that our understanding of ethics may not be necessarily the truth and we can be more open minded about discovering the actual truth.