

Reading Guide #1

Sumner, "A Defense of Cultural Relativism"
Gensler, "Cultural Relativism"*

1. **Sumner talks a lot about the "folkways" and "mores". What are they (They might be subtly different, but for the purposes of answering this question, assume they are the same thing!)? What is the relationship between morality and the folkways? What is the relationship of the folkways to philosophy?**
2. Sumner says that our mores "come down to us from the past. Each individual is born into them as he is born into the atmosphere, and he does not reflect on them or criticize them any more than a baby analyzes the atmosphere before he begins to breathe it" (222).
 - a. Why does Sumner think it is important to argue that we don't reflect on our mores or criticize them?
 - b. Imagine someone objecting as follows: "But surely Sumner is wrong. We reflect on our beliefs all the time. Isn't this what education does? I start off thinking that everything that my mother and father tells me is true and then I come to realize that the things that I believe may not be true. Isn't this how it works?" Assuming that the objector is right that this sort of thing does happen, how could Sumner explain our seeming ability to question the upbringing of our parents?
3. One way to explain changes in morality is to say that we are progressing. Thus, we don't burn witches anymore or have slaves because we have come to see some moral truths that our ancestors did not see.
 - a. Why is this explanation unavailable to Sumner?
 - b. What is Sumner's explanation of moral change? (Hint: The answer lies in the following: "New elements are brought in only by new conquests of nature through science and art." (p. 224)) Explain how this sentence answers the question.
4. According to Gensler's understanding of Cultural Relativism (CR), "good" just means "approved of by my society" and "wrong" means "disapproved of by my society."
 - a. Why does Gensler think that this is a bad definition of goodness and wrongness?
 - b. Using the above understanding of goodness, how would you translate the following: "It is wrong to merely do whatever your society approves of"? Is there a problem with this translation?
5. Ima relativist argues that since there is no way for one culture to prove to another culture that their own moral judgments are correct, then moral judgments must be relative. Gensler denies that this follows because there are many claims that can't be proven to be true or false but are nonetheless one or the other. His own example is whether or not it rained exactly here exactly 500 years ago. I would like to use another example. Consider reincarnation.

- a. Do you think that reincarnation is something that can be proven one way or another?
- b. Do you think that there is a fact of the matter of whether we are in fact reincarnated?
- c. **Explain what it would look like for reincarnation to be something that is relative to society. In other words, suppose that the truth of reincarnation depends upon which society you live in. Now explain what happens to you when you die.**