All is Not Relative
Questions for classroom discussions

1) The video states that pluralism is preferable to relativism. Do you agree? Why or why not?

2) Have you ever felt uncomfortable making a moral judgment? If so, why do you think you felt this way?

3) Do you think tolerance is a virtue? What are its limitations? Can you think of an instance when being tolerant is not ethically ideal?

4) Do you believe there is a set of universal values important to all people? If so, what are they? If not, why?

5) How might organizations (businesses, colleges, institutions, etc.) promote a culture of pluralism? How do organizations promote relativism? Is that okay?

6) Ethnocentrism is the idea or practice of judging someone from another culture, or other cultures, only by the values of one’s own culture. What are some specific examples of ethnocentrism? What is the difference between ethnocentrism and pluralism?

7) Is it possible to make moral judgments without being ethnocentric? If so, how?
Case Study: Bullfighting

Bullfighting has its roots in rituals dating back many centuries. In its modern Spanish style, bullfighting first became a prominent cultural event in the early 18th century. Yet despite its cultural significance, bullfighting continues to face increasing scrutiny in light of animal rights issues.

To many, bullfighting is considered a cruel sport in which the bull suffers a severe and tortuous death. Many animal rights activists often protest bullfighting in Spain and other countries, citing the needless endangerment of the bull and bullfighter. Some cities around the world, including Coslada, Spain; Mouans-Sartoux, France; and Teocelo, Mexico; where bullfighting was once popular have even declared themselves to be anti-bullfighting cities. Others have ceased killing the bull in the fight.

But to many others, the spectacle of the bullfight is not mere sport. Not only is the event culturally significant, but also a fine art in which the bullfighter is trained in a certain style and elicits emotion through the act of the fight. Writer Alexander Fiske-Harrison, in his research and training as a bullfighter, defends the practice and circumstances of the bull, “In terms of animal welfare, the fighting bull lives four to six years whereas the meat cow lives one to two. ...Those years are spent free roaming...” Others similarly argue that the death of the bull in the ring is more humane than the death of animals in a slaughterhouse.
Resources:

Bullfighting: Hallowed Tradition or Animal Torture? France Rules
http://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/21/bullfighting-hallowed-tradition-or-animal-torture/

Perhaps bullfighting is not a moral wrong

Animal Welfare Activists to Protest Bullfighting in Spain

Discussion Questions:

1) How is the controversy over bullfighting related to relativism?

2) How would a relativist interpret this controversy? How might a pluralist’s perspective differ?

3) Do you believe that bullfighting is an ethically wrong practice or a justifiable cultural event? Why?

4) In what ways might ethnocentrism affect your perspective on bullfighting? How would your opinion differ if you were raised in a different culture?

5) Do you agree that the death of the bull in the ring is more humane than the death of animals in a slaughterhouse? What ethical concerns are raised by both situations?
Case Study:
Banning Burkas: Freedom or Discrimination?

In September of 2010, the French Parliament passed a bill prohibiting people from concealing their faces in public areas. While this law applied to all citizens and all forms of face covering, it became known as France’s “burka bill” because the rhetoric surrounding the bill targeted Muslim women who wore burkas—religious garments covering the face and body—in public.

French lawmakers argued that the law was important for the separation of church and state and for the emancipation of women. Similar to the 2004 bill that outlawed the use of conspicuous religious symbols, including Muslim headscarves and Christian crosses, in public schools, this law sought to further remove religious expression and iconography from public spaces in France. Some legislators argued that the burka was a harmful symbol of gender inequality that forced women to assume a subservient status to men in public. According to them, the law freed women from a discriminatory, patriarchal subculture.

However, some in the French Muslim community saw the bill as an infringement of religious freedom and an act of cultural imperialism. They argued that French legislators were imposing their idea of gender equality onto their culture. Many of them, including some women, argued that wearing burkas actually emancipated women from the physical objectification so common in Western culture. A number of women protested the bill by dressing in burkas and going to the offices of lawmakers who supported the legislation. Other reports from individual women suggested that the law created a more hostile atmosphere for Islamic women in France. One of these women critiqued the bill, stating, “My quality of life has seriously deteriorated since the ban...the politicians claimed they were liberating us; what they've done is to exclude us from the social sphere.”

The law was challenged in 2014 and taken to the European Court of Human Rights. The court upheld the legality of the law.
Resources:

France's burqa ban: women are 'effectively under house arrest'
http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/19/battle-for-the-burqa

France's burka bill - background to a bitter debate
http://www.english.rfi.fr/france/20100526-sarkozy-and-burka

France's burka ban is a victory for tolerance

French Senate votes to ban Islamic full veil in public

Pourquoi No Burqa?
https://www.sandala.org/blog/pourquoi-no-burqa

Discussion Questions:

1) Lawmakers might argue that they were creating a more pluralistic society by banning all forms of religious expression in public places, whereas detractors might argue that the ban does just the opposite. Which side do you agree with and why?

2) Should all religious practices be tolerated in a free society? Are there limits to what you think should be allowed?

3) Do you think your home country should implement a ban on face coverings in public? Should religious garments and iconography from all faith traditions be banned in public schools as occurred in France in 2004? Why or why not?

4) According to some accounts, the law inspired instances of people acting violently against women who continued to wear burkas. Do the principles of separation of church and state and the emancipation of women outweigh these consequences?
Additional Resources

Values identification is one strategy for becoming more aware of the values we bring to the judgments we make. Watch the Values video from the G.V.V. video series to learn more about different value systems.

For related topics, see the Ethics Unwrapped videos Appropriation & Attribution and The Ethics of Representation. These videos address issues of relativism in relation to culture and the use or portrayal of other social groups.


Transcript of Narration
Written and Narrated by Deni Elliott

When in Rome, do as the Romans do. We’ve all heard that advice. If we’re talking about following the age-old Italian practice of eating salad after the main course, doing as the Romans do is fine. But, if some present-day Romans want to resurrect the ancient Roman practice of damnatio ad bestias, in which criminals and other deviants were fed to the lions, it would be irrational to follow that cruel practice just because it’s what the Romans, at one time, did.

Relativism is the belief that all it takes to make some potentially harmful act ‘right’ is the individual’s or group’s claim that it is ‘right.’ You can tell that someone is being a relativist when you hear, “Who am I to judge?” or “I can’t tell another person what’s right for her.” When people say that it’s not okay to judge someone else, or judge a specific culture’s practice by outside standards, they are practicing Relativism. And, they’re generally not thinking very deeply about what that means.

There is more than one right way to live one’s life. That’s where the Relativists are on the right track. Tolerance is indeed a virtue. But, we can allow for a wide range of ethically permitted behaviors and still agree that some actions are wrong – that’s to say, ethically prohibited. The problem of being a relativist, if the relativists are consistent, is that they can never make moral judgments about another person’s or group’s actions. And human beings just don’t function that way.

It’s human nature to protect ourselves and our loved ones from being caused harm. How would you respond if someone stole your sister’s smart phone? Broke into your house? Or even held you prisoner just because they wanted to? It’s unlikely that you’d uphold that person’s right to do what he felt was right for him – so we all make moral judgments, but the problem is that we often do it inconsistently.

A gunman opening fire in a movie theater? That’s simply wrong. Terrorists blowing up school buildings on the other side of the world? Awful. Immoral. It’s wrong to cause innocent people pain and death, regardless of mental illness or the point that the terrorists are trying to make.

Different cultures can have different customs such as when it’s proper to serve the salad course or how to honor religious beliefs. But when we move into the realm of ethics, we have to follow some universal rules like “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”
Typically, when people make relativistic claims, it’s likely that they’re actually promoting Pluralism and not Relativism. Whereas Relativism is tolerance to a fault, Pluralism is tolerance at its best. Pluralists believe that everyone should have the freedom to live their lives as they see fit... just as long as they don't cross the boundary of causing unjustified harm to other people.

So whereas a Relativist might say “Who am I to judge that blowing up a school building is necessarily bad,” a Pluralist would condemn that act. A Pluralist embraces diversity and respects all cultures, traditions, and religious beliefs, but would stop short of condoning extremist actions done in their name. So, live and let live is a fine philosophy, as long as it’s accompanied by clear judgments that causing unjustified harm is simply wrong. For everyone.