

Dinner Guests (The Laestrygonians)

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When in Rome...?



It is often said, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do!' and this is meant to highlight that different cultures and societies have different rules about what it is right to do. Sometimes this is about something minor like how much you tip a waiter, but other times it is about something much more important like whether women should be educated, or, as with the Laestrygonians, whether it's okay to eat other human beings. The questions we need to think

about here are:

- A Are these beliefs or practices simply relative to the culture or society that practises them? And
- B Does anyone outside of that particular culture or society ever have a right to criticise their practices?

Those that answer A with 'Yes, they are,' and B with 'No, they don't,' are known as *relativists*. Many people today consider themselves to be relativists. The opposite of a relativist is an *absolutist* and an absolutist believes that there are some values that are not up for negotiation. They believe that such values should hold true in any society at any time, such as 'It is wrong to needlessly torture someone.'

Try thinking about the following examples:



- 1 Two people are arguing about whether Marmite is delicious or not. Charlie says, 'Marmite is delicious!' but Lucy insists, 'No, you're wrong, it's horrible!' Who is right?



- 2 Two people are arguing about whether the Earth is round or flat. Minjin says, 'The Earth is round just like the moon and the other planets.' Whereas Nigel, who is a member of The Flat Earth Society, says, 'Nope. The Earth is flat.'
Who is right?



- 3 Two people are arguing about what $2 + 2$ equals. Johnny thinks, ' $2 + 2$ equals whatever you want it to equal.' But Ruby thinks, ' $2 + 2$ always equals '4', because it's logical.'
Who is right?



- 4 Now, imagine two people are arguing about whether it's okay to eat other people. Person A thinks, 'cannibalism is right,' but person B thinks, 'cannibalism is wrong'.
So, now: who is right?

Once you have done all the above exercises look through them again and answer this question: *in your view, which of the disputes 1, 2, 3 and 4 are relative and which are absolute (if any)?*



(The question says, 'in your view'. Are the answers to the last question relative to 'your view' or are they absolute?!)

A Related (or is it 'A Relative'?) Puzzle

Some people criticise relativism by saying that it commits a logical error and proves itself wrong. They say that relativists are committed to the following statement: 'All things are relative!' But the critics point out that if *all things are relative* then the claim that 'all things are relative' must be absolute and not relative because it says 'all things'. And if the claim 'all things are relative' is absolute then it is not the case that all things are relative, so the claim 'all things are relative' is false. Are the critics right about this? Does this logical argument disprove relativism?