

Review of
***Human Universals* by Donald E. Brown**

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Human Universals is a critique of the extreme cultural relativism that has dominated socio-cultural anthropology and the rest of social science since at least the 1930s. I studied anthropology in Brown's generation of the 1960s and remember this theoretical approach. The reason given then was that cultural relativism was a reaction against racial determinism. Brown also discusses this among other reasons. Brown does not deny relativism, but advocates a balance or an interaction between the study of culture as an emergent system that is uniquely fashioned by populations of humans and the study of human biology and psychology that influences culture. The latter produces the universals. He states that although universals are present in the ethnological literature, differences between cultures have been emphasized to their neglect because anthropologists have considered preliterate and peasant cultures as unique entities with their own individual styles that are to be understood on their own terms. Besides, universals were difficult to explain and thus almost ignored until advances were made in genetics, ethology, neurology, and psychology. Brown primarily writes for anthropologists and other scientists who study human beings. Even though the debate on human universals vs. cultural differences that Brown discusses is mostly contained within anthropology, Brown extends an invitation to "everybody" outside the discipline who drives the research because of their proclivity for the exotic, and thus their stake in anthropology.

Brown began to overcome his skepticism about universals when he studied the Brunei Malay and needed to make assumptions about universals, including the psychological universals that partly comprise human nature, to explain their social stratification. Although human universals do exist, he writes, they are complicated and are difficult to sort out. Brown doubts whether a single unifying theory can explain the entire array of cultural, social, linguistic, and individual universals, but he thinks that the single source for universals may be found in human nature, the foundation of which is the human mind. Here, explanations for universals may be found and, conversely, universals may be used to guide analysis of human nature. This doesn't seem to be circular reasoning as much as reiterative research. Human nature is a kind of unifying concept that relates universals found in all human realms. The morphology and cognitive functions of the human brain are certainly fundamental universals. The mind and body are an integrated whole that is a shared human universal and human consciousness constitutes a shared experience.

Brown doesn't define human nature; rather, he implies that it is an intuitive entity because everyone shares it; everyone *is* it. He points out that what everyone "knows" but is made more obvious in its acknowledgment, is that, despite cultural differences, the distinctions in language, customs, and worldview, people recognize one another and what they are doing. A Vietnamese friend of mine, Nhi, recently emailed me, "Granddad, I fully trust you, too, and I also feel I can speak my mind and feelings to you openly."

Despite the question of language barrier or culture, it's so easy to have whatever type of conversation with you." Brown places the highest priority for the social sciences on the investigation of human nature and the human mind.

Brown builds his case in Chapter 1 by reviewing six classic studies that cover a broad range of subject matter—social structure, anthropological linguistics, and psychology—that apparently supported cultural relativism and the later studies that refuted them. Conklin's complex analysis of Hanunóo color categories is mentioned by Brown as one of many such investigations that lent credence to the assumption that color terms among different cultures were arbitrary segments of a continuous color spectrum. Brown does not disclaim the facts that the classification of color varies among languages—only that basic color terms are not arbitrary but differ, and they differ, according to his cited cross-cultural study by Berlin and Kay, within a universal set of eleven terms that are distinctly ordered. Conklin himself wrote, "Under laboratory conditions, color *discrimination* is probably the same for all human populations, irrespective of language; but the manner in which different languages classify the millions of 'colors' which every normal individual can discriminate *differs*" (Conklin, 1955). Conklin does not particularly assert cultural arbitrariness here—only cultural differences. Further, he implies a universality of color discrimination. As Brown wrote, others interpreted such studies according to the prevailing prejudice of cultural relativism.

One of the most influential works on anthropological thought was Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Her conclusions that Samoan adolescents did not experience the stress that is found in other cultures were contested by Freeman and others who studied Samoans for a much longer time and did not go to the field predisposed to the idea that there were no inherent biological bases to human behavior as Mead did. Similarly, Mead's conclusions in *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, that the male and female roles among the Chambri were reversed, were later questioned by Gewertz, who saw no domination of women over men. Brown attributes Mead's findings to a temporary atypical situation possibly much the same as with the Samoans.

Conclusions from the other investigations—that facial expressions have no biological origins, that there is no concept of time in the Hopi language, and that the Oedipus complex was not universal but only culturally determined—were also discredited by later research. Brown is careful to assert that none of the above cases is proof of cultural universals—only that they cast doubt on cultural relativism; not that relativism is invalid, but extreme relativism that denies any connection with an underlying biology is.

The refutation of what was at the time considered careful research gives a warning about how scientific facts and ensuing theory can be reinterpreted within a different set of assumptions about the nature of culture and society. This problem of a researcher's beliefs and ideology preconditioning research objectives and conclusions detracts from scientific objectivity, especially about the study of human beings, which is often done in an emotionally charged atmosphere. Even biological and psychological determinism can be overstated within the new theoretical shift.

According to Brown, universals cannot yet be proven even if existing methods can demonstrate that many elements are common across all cultures. An exhaustive investigation into all societies using sufficient descriptions of culture is not feasible to validate universality without a doubt. Therefore, “all statements of universality are hypotheses” to be tested. But what is a universal? In Chapter 2 Brown states that the establishment of working definitions of universals is probably impeded by artificial distinctions between biology and culture, and between the concepts of individual, society, and culture. If anthropologists have considered universals interesting, they had to be determined by culture since a major proposition in anthropology is that culture is a thing in itself, the learned behavior of societies of humans and irreducible to the biological and “lower” mental functions. David Bidney’s critique is key here: culture cannot be deduced from human nature—it is contingent on time and place and is self-organizing—but it arises from human nature and does not exist apart from it, *sui generis*, preceding the individual. The separation by anthropologists of nature and culture into two distinct domains, yet the inability to make a clear distinction between them, reveals the need to investigate the interaction between them. The understanding of facial expressions requires both. Pertinent to the interaction between bio-psychological universals and cultural variants is Paul Ekman’s facial expression study and his “neuro-cultural” theory.

Brown credits Clifford Geertz with the important interactionist model. Geertz critiqued the social science conception of four distinct and autonomous levels of analysis—biological, psychological, social, and cultural—with which identified cultural universals are associated. He proposed a new research framework that analyzed the interaction between the four because it was unlikely that there was a simple unilinear evolutionary sequence of body _ brain _ socio-cultural organization, a “causal chain” whereby adaptive function is explanatory. Instead, an interactive, systematic model may be more explanatory whereby cause _ effect is replaced by an evolving holistic system. In this model culture is not a separate entity that is brought about by an underlying anatomy and physiology but culture, along with mind, is emergent and has no beginning or starting point, no cultural Rubicon that was abruptly crossed by the “first real human.” It has coevolved with biology. Like Geertz, Brown considers the best explanatory model linking biology and culture to be evolutionary theory.

Geertz makes an interesting inference from the interaction of biology and culture that human nature is not to be defined by cultural universals but by cultural variation. There is no need to postulate a generic culture since the particulars of flexible and adaptive cultures have just as much a genetic base as the more constrained genetic control of the behavior of other animals. Conversely, “our nervous system itself,” according to Geertz, “is now a product of culture.” This helps to answer the question of how much the cultural environment influences brain/cognitive development and conditions the perception of reality, not just by controlling the structure of thought but shaping neurology during development.

Recent landmark research (Enard *et al.*, 2002) indicates that the differences in gene expression between humans and the chimpanzee (the closest genetically related primate)

occur in the brain. The contention is when the brain evolved with the rapidity suggested by this research—whether during the past several millennia or millions of years, as suggested by Australopithecine brain morphology. An important point raised by Enard *et al.* is the future clarification of “how many of the [gene expression] differences have functional consequences.” Paleoanthropological and archaeological data are very limited in addressing the range of early human behavior. The increasing number of fossils has given an idea about the sequence and rate of development of the principle hominid characteristics of upright posture and brain morphology as well as the geographical distribution and the paleoenvironmental context of those fossils over time. Stone tools from Ethiopia dated to about 2.5 million years ago are the earliest cultural traces left by hominid populations (Ambrose, 2002) and geometric engravings on two pieces of red ochre recently found in a South African cave are the earliest evidence of symbolic thinking (Balter, 2002).

The historical sciences have the questionable advantage of never being able to prove their theories about conditions in the past because no one was around to affirm them. There are only the linkages of historical material and genetic facts that strengthen or diminish the likelihood of contesting theories. The problem then becomes how we get to the “real” past and how we come to know what our common heritage was when our predecessors migrated from Africa.

Brown’s fourth and fifth theses concerning human biology and evolutionary psychology (listed in the Introduction) are related. A resistance to accepting biology as being reflected by human universals may be based in (1) its non-cultural physiological functions that are merely a cause of basic needs, and (2) genetic programming that has nothing to do with the epigenetic quality of culture as learned behavior and thought. With the introduction of psychology—consciousness, the inward experience of an organism—culture and biology are integrated. Sharing a common mind entails a fairly complex cognitive structure and dispositions for social organization and symbolic communication that may be rooted in the architecture of the brain. These can be differentiated and elaborated into cultural variants—that is, the style may be different but the existence of style as a phenomenon is the universal. This is not abstracting a universal from the unique but recognizes a common phenomenon that results in specifics. Apropos of this are the two kinds of universals defined by Noam Chomsky and Robin Fox, whom Brown considers “the most important present-day contributors to understanding universals.” “Substantive” (or surface) universals are those commonly thought of as cultural elements as discussed in this book, such as tool making, social structure, art, and language, and universals at a deeper level of “process” that have their source in neurobiology.

Brown sometimes refers to absolute universals. The uncertainty of positively identifying them because of the possible inaccuracy of ethnographic accounts and the complexity of human behavior, however, created a need for “near universals.” These are traits that are considered universals because of their presence in most cultures, but not all, and are therefore assigned a place along a continuum close to the end where absolute universals arise. So-called “statistical universals” are also arrayed along a continuum farther from

near universals but considered universals because of their occurrence in cultures with a frequency greater than chance. Some universals are said to exist when certain conditions are present and so are termed “conditional” or “implicational” universals. They are supposed to belong to a set of universals from which they have been selected. Thus they may appear to be relative to particular cultures but are fundamentally universals. In fact, according to Brown, whether or not cultural traits are considered expressions of cultural relativism or universalism is contingent on the theoretical viewpoint taken. An example of a conditional universal is a number system that is a particular variant arising from the universal human capacity for counting but may not be expressed by all cultures. This is equivalent to the contrast between substantive and deeper universals.

The rest of Chapter 2 continues to present a dizzying collection of definitions of universals, some of which are synonymous in meaning, including research frameworks that demonstrate their use in anthropology in spite of the dominant relativist paradigm. Brown considers it important to differentiate emic and etic universals. These are terms used in anthropology to refer to cultural elements that are recognized by people within a society (emic) and elements that are part of a scientific taxonomy used by outside ethnologists in analyzing a society (etic), whether or not they are part of the conceptual system of the society. Brown usually defines universal traits as etic.

These universal cultural traits are summarized in Chapter 6 by means of a fictitious Universal People (UP) whose culture has the elements of all cultures around the world. Language is an important part of the UP culture as a necessary form of symbolic communication of external action and internal thought. Language has a structure of sound, gesture, meaning, and logic similar to all others. It contains a classification system and is used for conjectural reason. Subtleties of language include manipulation of others, lying, humor, gossip, insults, metaphor, and poetry. Another important feature of the UP is a concept of personhood that includes a responsible self as distinguished from others. Among others, many common cultural elements include those subsumed by various psychological features, tool making, shelters, the use of fire, a social structure, division of labor, politics, laws, etiquette, taboos, decorative art, song and dance, religious beliefs, rituals, and a worldview. Brown bases inclusion of the above cultural universals in what is essentially a list of whether or not their conception or definition is credible to him. It is drawn from the literature but it is his list. Brown suggests the need for further work on seeking the deeper levels of universals and showing the relationships between universals.

Many of the cultural elements used by Brown to describe the UP are taken from George Murdock’s Human Relations Area Files (HRAF). The HRAF is a coded list of cultural traits and complexes compiled from ethnographies written on cultures from around the world. It developed out of Murdock’s interest in the classification of cultural universals. He regarded the classifications as having “an objective reality” since “competent authorities of diverse theoretical viewpoints” concurred with them. However, appeal to authority is hardly a scientific method of validation. One problem is that the etic taxonomy is that of Western science, which itself is a cultural institution developed for the purpose of acquiring a body of objective truth through specific methods. The correctness of the classification must therefore be assumed within the cultural context of

anthropological science even though it may be one of many that can be generated by people with different worldviews and different methods to acquire knowledge (a relative comment!). The HRAF and other taxonomies may even be “an artifact of classificatory ingenuity,” as Kroeber argued. Brown has cited others who have reservations about substantive universals and he has maintained that universal statements are hypothetical. A saving grace about scientific “truth” is that the ongoing testing of theory through experiment and the systematic collection and analysis of data carefully builds and modifies the body of knowledge. This procedure mitigates the tendency toward rigid belief and allows lively debate between advocates of different theoretical positions.

Brown explains that the fortunes of human universals have been tied to the history of anthropological thought in which the objective scientific attitude has been diluted by ideology and politics. The positive aspect of anthropology in terms of universals is its holistic, comparative method and that anthropologists attempt a global representation of humanity. On the negative side, most anthropologists emphasize cultural differences and offer little on similarities. They exaggerate sociocultural conditioning and have created a “mythology of boundless human plasticity” (however, the power of conditioning is a valuable concept, along with the hard-wired neurological basis).

There has been a swing between the two poles of universalism and relativism in anthropology since the late nineteenth century when E. B. Tylor mustered Adolf Bastian’s concept of the psychic unity of mankind against racial theories of cultural differences. Ironically, the development of cultural relativism by Boas and his students was in part to combat the assertion that cultural differences are the result of racial differences in intelligence with the argument that differences resulted from the histories of culture. Boas did, however, maintain that psychic unity produced cultural universals. So it isn’t a simple either-or in anthropology. Even though anthropology swung from universals to the particulars of culture, with an emphasis on cultural relativity, the concept of cultural universals was always present and had its advocates, but it was considered insignificant by many workers because it was grounded in psychology and biology and had no clear connection to culture. Relativism was also reinforced in sociology by Durkheim, and in psychology by behaviorism.

The dichotomy is contained within a larger philosophical context that dates to third-century Greece when Plato advanced his idea that knowledge is fully present in the human mind at birth and his student Aristotle declared the opposite view—that at birth the human mind was a blank tablet (*De anima*), on which knowledge was “written” through experience. These two propositions developed into the internalist (rationalist) and empiricist philosophical schools that debated the problem of whether “nature or nurture” determined human thought and behavior.

The nature-nurture argument began to be reconciled when Noam Chomsky criticized behaviorism and propounded his theory of the deep structure of languages in 1959. This was followed between 1969 and 1971 by works on universalism by Berlin and Kay, who wrote about the universals of color terms; Ward Goodenough, who discusses “the role of universalism in ordering anthropological description and comparison”; and Tiger and

Fox, who created a human biogrammar from the links with universals found in evolutionary theory, ethology, the human fossil record, and ethnographies.

It is easy to explain the differences in cultures by referring to cultural relativism—the unrestrained plasticity of humans produces variety. It is much more difficult, however, to account for similarities given the human disposition for diversity. Brown discusses some explanations that have been offered by anthropologists. He notes that referral to biological or interactive biological-cultural explanations is not clear since the theoretical history of separation between the two realms has prevented the construction of suitable concepts to link them.

In the last chapter Brown makes an appeal to anthropologists to reintegrate universals into their theoretical models now that the fields of neurology, genetics, primatology, and paleoanthropology have developed useful databases and research tools for exploring human universals. He reviews the assumptions about nature and culture that comprise the paradigm of anthropology but are erroneous and are barriers to incorporating an interactionist framework into anthropology. Brown sets out a program for future research with the goal of establishing links between biology, the concept of human nature, and culture. This research should move in opposite directions, starting with culture and explaining universals by working with psychologists and biologists in one direction, then moving from the universals and the psychobiology of human nature and working with other social scientists to explain cultural behavior.

Brown goes on to defend anthropology as a distinct discipline with its unique specialized methods and knowledge. Perhaps he does this since by refuting invalid propositions that give identity to anthropology there is a danger of it losing its status as a separate science. Shouldn't the separation of academic disciplines, which are the consequence of their history, however, be questioned? How much of conceiving culture as a thing in itself, without reference to biology and psychology, is a result of academic partitioning and the need to define and legitimize one's discipline apart from the others? Brown disparages the motives of anthropologists who pursue a "quest for the exotic" that involves professional and public standing, and maintaining cash flow for salaries and grants. The problem may not be critical, though, since new sciences have evolved from the interaction of traditional ones without distress when new fields of inquiry arise, such as neuropsychology, molecular biology, and geoarchaeology.

References (Note: citations not given here are taken from *Human Evolution* and can be found in the Bibliography).

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