

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 20 marks

The debate on human rights is caught between the limitations of both universalism and cultural relativism. Comment.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 "caught between" = a deadlock → universalism over-reaches, relativism under-protects

R2 each side half-right, half-blind → the debate advances only when their strengths combine

Body flow

universalism (**Kant**, dignity, UDHR) → its limit: it carries Western liberal assumptions → cultural relativism (**Boas**, legitimacy through local context) → its limit: shields FGM / child marriage, becomes an authoritarian cloak → Asian values (**Lee Kuan Yew**) → **Sen's** reply: Asia too diverse, serves power not culture

Counter-view

relativism's charge of Western hegemony vs the universalist charge that relativism excuses abuse

Conclusion routes

R1 **Donnelly's** relative universalism → universal in principle, flexible in application, "culture is not destiny"

R2 **Gutmann's** deliberation → shared principles applied through dialogue, not by imposing the dominant view

The point in the question is a deadlock : *universalism over-reaches, cultural relativism under projects and human rights seem trapped between the two.*

Each side is partly right and partly blind, and the debate moves forward only when their strengths are combined.

Universalism holds that rights belong to every person, irrespective of culture, religion or nationality. Its moral anchor is Immanuel Kant's idea of human dignity, expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human rights. Its limitations is that this universal language often carries western liberal assumptions. By treating one cultural vision as the standard for all, it can disregard genuine differences in how societies understand dignity and freedom.

Franz Boas made this view prominent by rejecting ethno-centrism & the claim that any culture is superior. Relativism can shield harmful practices such as female genital mutilation & child marriage and is invoked by authoritarian regimes.

The Asian values argument of leaders like Lee Kuan Yew placed community & order above individual rights. Amartya Sen replied that Asia is too diverse for any single set of "Asian values", and that such claims usually serve power, not culture.

The way out lies between the two. Jack Donnelly's relative universalism keeps rights universal in principle but flexible in application, since "culture is not destiny".

Amy Gutmann adds that common standards should emerge through deliberation, not by imposing the dominant understanding. Rights are best defended as shared principles, applied through dialogue.