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Cultural Relativism

In James Rachels's chapter "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism," he presents both viewpoints of cultural relativism. Rachels begins by stating that since different cultures have different morals, it is unfair to use our own ideals as a guideline. People must have an open mind because one's morality is relative to one's culture. However, Rachels goes on to discredit cultural relativism because the premise of one's argument concerns what people believe, but the conclusion doesn't follow logically. It doesn't work because a strong conclusion can't be made just because people disagree on a topic. Despite the logic behind Rachels's objection, I believe that he is wrong to regard morality as similar to areas of thought like geography, because there is no universal standard of morality.

Cultural relativism relies on the principle that moral codes vary from culture to culture. Rachels uses the Greeks and the Callatians to make his point. The Callatians (a tribe of Indians) traditionally ate the bodies of their deceased fathers, whereas the Greeks cremated the dead bodies. The Callatians ate the bodies out of respect and a desire for their father's spirit to live in them. Burning their fathers would thus be seen as scornful. Rachels then states that "these customs cannot be said to be 'correct' or 'incorrect,' for that implies that we have an independent standard of right and wrong by which they may be judged. But there is no such independent standard; every standard is culture-bound"

(p. 18). Therefore, cultural relativism challenges the notion of universal moral truths and replaces them with different cultural laws. These cultural laws are:

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action *is* right, at least within the society.
3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code better than another's.
4. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is merely one among many.
5. There is no "universal truth" in ethics; that is, there are no moral truths that hold for all peoples at all times.
6. It is mere arrogance for us to try to judge the conduct of other peoples. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the practices of other cultures.

(pp. 18–19)

The cultural relativist's approach is to argue the facts about different cultural norms and then draw a conclusion on cultural morality. This systematic approach is very tolerant of other cultures, but is illogical.

Rachels ultimately decides that cultural relativism is unsound. The main fault in this belief is that it relies on belief rather than fact. When two parties disagree on an issue, the conclusion is that there is no objective truth. Rachels uses the geographical example of the earth to make his point. Can there be no objective truth in geography since people disagree about the roundness of the earth? One cannot draw a conclusion

about a topic from the fact that there was a disagreement. The main fault is that cultural
50 relativism disregards facts in order to remain impartial and open-minded.

Cultural relativism is also unsound because it prevents us from judging the
customs and morality of other societies. This belief would have prevented the U.S. from
intervening with Nazi Germany's quest to exterminate the Jewish race. Additionally, we
could evaluate the morality of our actions by comparing them to our society's standard.
55 This would be a convenient way of assessing our actions, but we would be helpless to
change any injustice imposed by our society. For example, because abolitionists in the
nineteenth century questioned and opposed society's stance on slavery, the slaves were
emancipated. This evaluation of society is vital for moral progress. Cultural relativism
opposes progress because it means revising the previous ways of doing things, which
60 were in accord with the standards of its time. This is dangerous because society changes
with each generation and if the morals don't modify then people will be judged unfairly
by antiquated standards. Rachels further discredits cultural relativism by revealing
inherent common values in all cultures. For example, caring for helpless infants is
integral for the survival of any society; additionally a law outlawing murder is a necessity
65 for every culture. Even the most different societies must adhere to certain natural laws to
ensure their survival.

Rachels objects to cultural relativism by comparing morality to geography.
Rachels states that disagreement in the premise results in no objective truth in the
conclusion. The same systematic approach used to reach a conclusion in geography
70 cannot be used for moral questions. The two are incompatible because morality is a
different body of thought than geography. Geography is based on tangible facts and

evidence where the truth is irrefutable. Morality, however, is an intangible and mystical quality that cannot be scientifically proven. Morality varies for each culture because societies develop differently according to their environment. Therefore, there is no one standard of morality and to compare it to geography is unreasonable. While scientists can show people satellite pictures of the earth's roundness, religious leaders lack the concrete evidence to support their own beliefs. They can only regurgitate their own creeds with the hope of persuading non-believers to adopt their beliefs. Thus, Rachels is wrong to consider morality similar to scientific rationale.

Cultural relativism also provides us with important insights. Rachels states that "Cultural Relativism warns us, quite rightly, about the danger of assuming that all our preferences are based on some absolute rational standard" (p. 30). The funerary customs of the Callatians and the ancient Greeks are an example of differing social standards; both are right in their own respect because they are cultural products. Additionally, cultural relativism keeps us open-minded. It reveals human vulnerability to hold prejudices and provides the understanding that these seemingly large differences are only minor deviations in cultural practices. The ability to distinguish cultural differences from non-cultural ones would satisfy both the cultural relativist and the skeptic. With this understanding and worldly perspective, human relations would undoubtedly improve.

I believe the cultural relativism argument is compelling, but ultimately unreasonable. Cultural relativism is appealing because no one is wrong or inferior to anyone else. However, this is a luxury societies cannot support. Societies need innovative thinkers that will question society and ultimately bring progress. Cultural relativism prevents people from challenging the norm and is thus incongruent with the nature of

95 mankind. Rachels and I agree on this point, but disagree on morality. He holds morality under the same standard of science. This is impossible because they are too dissimilar. Science is the pursuit of understanding the physical world and morality relates to the standard of right behavior. Thus, cultural relativism allows for varying morality since there is no one standard of universal conduct.