

In what ways can cultural considerations make a difference to what ought we ought to do and ought not do, and in what ways can they make no such difference?

With the vast amounts of cultures, moral codes, conventions and traditions in the world today, one may find it difficult to sift through, come to terms with or conclude which is the most morally correct. Several manners of thought or reactions can take place when one considers and observes cultures that can either lead to one validating why one's own ethics are right, or one attempting to objectively understand another culture, or going to extreme lengths of posing neither judgement nor understanding on other cultures in an attempt of extreme tolerance. In this essay these three manners will be looked into in depth as to how they affect how we gauge what actions to be right and wrong, whether our own ethics should even be affected and the problems that each manner poses. The point of when it is necessary or permitted to interfere in another's beliefs and culture will also be explored as this appears to be a somewhat hazy line or distinction especially in present time and recent history.

The last of the three manners referred to in the above introduction can be explained in terms of the theory of Cultural Relativism. This is a theory which states that when observing another culture, one should not or cannot pass any judgement because “there are only various cultural codes” and that “our own code has no special status” (Rachels, 2003, p. 18). This can be thought of as a manner of extreme tolerance when considering other cultures and also as one end of the spectrum when it comes to reacting to customs outside of what one is used to. The other end would be to blatantly judge or even criticize a culture based on its customs and ethics and how they differ from our own (Rachels, 2003, p. 22). Between these two extremes there is the possibility of attempting to understand the customs of another culture even if they conflict greatly with what one has been brought up to believe (Rachels, 2003, p. 22). All have issues pertaining to them as well as benefits. Having indicated the differences between these main points, we will begin at the end of the spectrum which involves the most conscious judgement.

Cultures and societies may maintain different belief systems and ethics pertaining to each group independently. Through experiences and exposure to different cultures and opinions, a person may find it hard or uncomfortable to accept what they come across as it may appear to be far too alien or even immoral by their own cultural standards (Midgley, 1981, p. 74). This is, in a sense, a natural

reaction because it is not comfortable to reject what one has been conditioned or brought up to believe in favour of accepting something else. If a certain custom is unappealing then it can be used as an example of what not to hold as moral for some people or cultures. For example, in certain Asian cultures eating some species of dog is a standard method of living (Baggini, 2015). However, for a lot of people who have grown up with Western ideologies, this may seem like a repulsing action. When observed, it seems most of the customs found in different cultures depend on what a society is disgusted by or by what that society constitutes as respectful. By living by the method of comparing one culture to another and the different views of what one ought to do and ought not to do, a “framework of comparison of our own policies” is created in which it can be argued that we “[profit] by other people's insights or mistakes” (Midgley, 1981, p. 72). In this way cultural considerations affect our decisions about what constitutes morality. However logical this branch of thinking seems to be, there are several problems with dealing with different cultures in this way.

Firstly, the difference between judging and criticizing or interfering is not always clear (Midgley, 1981, p. 71). This occurs when a person uses their own culture or beliefs as a type of measuring stick for what is right, forms an opinion and thrusts it on the culture in question while forgetting to question the circumstances behind why that culture may apply the custom that it does (Rachels, 2003, p. 23). However, one must not forget that one's native culture may not be the most right course of action but the course of action that one is most accustomed to and believes. With this in mind, it does not follow that a person can pass the criticism that another culture is “morally inferior.” (Rachels, 2003, p. 21). Returning to the idea of certain cultures eating dogs, it is entirely possible that people living by Western standards find the idea uncomfortable because they are accustomed to keeping dogs as pets and therefore see the animal as a kind of companion (Baggini, 2015). By this logic, a person who keeps any livestock as a pet would be justified in not wanting to eat beef. This refers to the second method of approaching various cultures with an understanding mindset which will be explored later. Lastly, however, these points do not mean to say that a person cannot judge whether an action is better or worse for themselves to undertake. The error often lies in the degree of involvement or criticism one passes when considering other cultures and the fine line between reflecting on one's self and acting in defense of one's own ethics; however, this may be a personal moral value in itself. In these ways cultural considerations affect how we perceive morality.

The one end of the spectrum just discussed provides a view on how observing cultures may add to how a person or society decides to model their own moral code. A less extreme method is also possible. This is the method of attempting to understand exactly why a culture follows certain codes

and traditions and trying to be open-minded without having to criticize or be completely indifferent as a Cultural Relativist. This follows the theory of by “succeed[ing] in understanding [other culture's ethics],” you will “do something better than giving up judging them.” (Midgley, 1981, p. 73). An example of a cultural practice which may seem bizarre to Western observers is an Indonesian practice of “living with the dead.” (Bhatt, 2014). This is where a corpse is looked after by members of the family, dressed well in fabrics and kept in a room within the house until the appropriate time to be buried (Bhatt, 2014). This may seem like a very unusual practice until one investigates to find that it is more to do with the funds a family has available to hold a funeral which tends to be rather expensive (Bhatt, 2014). The custom then seems less unusual. However, this is only because its reasons have now been fitted to reasons that suit the culture of the observer. This is where an issue comes about in this method of dealing with cultural considerations. It is not entirely possible to accept morals or customs of another culture without taking them on as our own (Midgley, 1981, p. 73). In this sense, considering and trying to understand ethical codes separate from our own affects our sense of morality.

The ways in which cultural considerations make a difference to one's moral code have been analysed thus far. However, there is a stand which one can take which ensures that barely any or at least very little difference is made. This would be the opposite end of the spectrum introduced earlier and would be the stand of a Relativist who believes that it is better to allow each group live by whatever suits them in order to keep a type of respectful peace between different ethos (Midgley, 1981, p. 69). The Relativist also thinks in this way because it is believed that it is impossible to make sound judgements about cultures outside of one's own and which one does not completely understand or take to be true (Midgley, 1981, p. 69). It is the basic thought of because one cannot be completely sure that one's own moral code is the right one to act by and because one does not want to appear disrespectful in implying that it is by passing judgement on other's morals, it is wiser to stand back in a position of tolerance (Rachels, 2003, p. 16). As attractive and respectful as this stance may appear, it comes with several rather severe problems and flaws regarding the welfare of society as a whole.

To take on this stance of tolerance, in certain extreme cases one may appear to be not only trying to be respectful but also indifferent to groups and their respective morals (Midgley, 1981, p. 69). For example, suppose that one group holds a custom, such as murder, to be righteous or true and in the process of this belief damages the welfare of any other group, the Relativist's stance suggests that this would be acceptable and he would stand back without any sense of empathy for those having to suffer the murder (Rachels, 2003, p. 28). Not only would a person who adopts this view not be able

to intervene with practices which they perceive to have little regard towards the value of life, they would also not be in a position to praise those which do (Rachels, 2003, p. 21). This also indicates that society as a whole would not be able to progress or even regress if everyone adopted this stance because all would be relative and, to a great degree, indifferent. If one cannot adapt and learn from the behaviour of others and the consequences of certain actions then there is no room for growth and morality as a whole is redundant (Rachels, 2003, p. 22). These are two issues which this stance towards considering other cultures evokes. Therefore, though the Relativist's method of thought makes no such difference to his own moral code, there are repercussions on society as a whole if this theory is widespread and applied to all areas of life and tradition.

After analysing what it implies to take on a Relativist's stance, there comes the question of why do people still in a sense “jump in” and attack the customs of other cultures in certain cases. This is a more personal viewpoint but it is perhaps largely to do with the empathy one person feels for another, another being, animal or even the environment. To take an example, one could consider slavery being accepted in a random culture. One could take up a relativist stance and claim that if that is what the culture abides by then one should not interfere. However, once one sees the affect the slavery has on the slave himself, having been demeaned with having no kind of rights as a human being, one might be more eager to impose on that culture's practices. This point also does not point in favour of Relativism as Relativism itself is an example of a way in which considering other cultures has no affect on one's own morality.

To conclude, ways in which cultures can be considered have been explored to show that certain methods of thought can lead to differences being made in an individual's own moral code or can lead to no difference taking place at all. Firstly it has been proven that an individual can use other cultures to indicate to themselves that their own ethics are in fact the better root to abide by, though this is usually with the individual forgetting that his own views are not the standard to which every other moral should be measured against. Other than this, it has also been analysed that the individual may attempt to gain a better understanding of moral codes other than his own and this may also result in making a difference to what he ought and ought not do. Lastly cultural considerations have also been proven to make no such difference if the consideration is viewed in a Relativist sense and that human empathy may play a vital role in whether one breaks away from this stance for the sake of something outside of oneself.

Reference List:

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