**Writing Assignment 1**

The existence of moral truths is a question philosophers have been debating for many years. This question aims to answer whether or not there is an absolute difference between what is right and wrong, an absolute scale to determine whether an action is perceived as good or bad. This is very important to society, because society has its own values and ideas as to what is right and wrong. This is needed to delineate the difference between the bad and good people in society so it is clear who needs to be punished and who deserves a rewarded. However, in order for there to be moral truths, there must be some observable and absolute truth about morality and what is right or wrong. Without this absolute scale, morality becomes relative, and it is less clear as to what is right and wrong. This idea of relativism is the first argument against moral truths.

Cultural relativity is the argument that there are no moral truths because different societies and groups of people have different belief systems. Ruth Benedict gives an example of different beliefs systems in one of his essays. He describes the difference between Greek and Callatian treatment of their dead fathers. The Greeks would cremate their dead fathers while Callatian would eat their dead fathers. Either of these cultures would find what the other one does with their dead fathers horrifying. There are many other examples of this type of differences in cultures and customs. Cultural relativist would then argue that since there are many different cultures and belief systems, there is know way of knowing which one is correct without an independent scale to compare these different cultures too. Without this independent scale to compare cultures to, the argument as to which one is better than the other becomes subjective, and provides no evidence as to which is better.

This is a strong argument because it appeals to logic, especially logic used in mathematics. In mathematics, there is a concept of relations, where two different objects can be compared in some way. In this case, the objects are cultures of different societies, and they can be compared by differences in their moral values. In order to state that one culture is better than the other, there must be at least a partial ordering between the cultures. However, a partial ordering cannot be achieved without an independent scale to judge them on. Intuitively, it is commonly know that five is greater than three, because we can compare them on the number line and use the exact definition of what five and three are. However, if there was no number line or definition of five and three, there is no way to compare them and decide which is larger or smaller until there is more information. This argument is similar to cultural relativity. However, this argument does have some weaknesses. Cultural relativist have to accept that since there is no scale to compare cultures, cultures cannot be objectively compared. This also means that there is no notion of social or moral progress, since there is know scale for the society to progress down. Another common problem against cultural relativity is the conclusion does not directly follow from the premise. Differences in opinion does not lead directly to the conclusion that there is no absolute answer, it just means there are two different answers to a questions, which either one or both of which may be right or wrong.

Ruth Benedict discusses the problem with cultural relativism in his essay “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism.” He argues that the conclusion no moral truths exist does not directly follow from the cultural relativity argument. This makes the argument un sounds, meaning that even though the premise may be true, it does not guarantee the conclusion is false. When there are two differences in opinions, it does not directly follow that there is no right answer. If there are two different views, it is still possible that one or both of the views are right or wrong. Consider the example two plus two equals four. By the definition of integers, this is a known fact. A society can also be conceived where they believe two plus two equals five. However, this does not mean there is no correct answer to two plus two. In this case, two societies have two different mathematical belief systems, but one of the belief systems happens to be wrong. This same logical process applies to the cultural relativism argument as well. This does not mean that the argument is wrong, but that there is not enough evidence to support the conclusion. If cultural relativism is accepted as true, then there are some consequences which follow. The first consequence of cultural relativism is different societies cannot be considered inferior to another. Another consequence that follows is that moral right and wrong is decided by the values of the society in which they live. The last consequence is there is no longer a concept of social progress. Societies cannot be seen as getting better, but instead may just changed their values. The last point Benedict makes regarding cultural relativism is that even though some cultures differ in different aspects, they do not differ by much. There are still basic moral rules all cultures must follow to survive, such as raising young or not killing each other. Societies which believed in these principles would not be capable of existing because their population would eventually die off and not get replaced. He argues these common moral values must be moral truths.

Benedict provides strong arguments against cultural relativism and the existence of moral truths. The logic provided by the argument to derive the conclusion from the premise is not correct, and therefore cultural relativism is not a sound argument. Appealing to logic and flaws in argument are a great way of showing inconsistencies within a theory. The consequences Benedict draws from cultural relativism directly follow as well. Without an absolute moral scale, which cultural relativity believes, there is no way to compare one culture to another to decide which is better, or to even judge a societies own progress. Benedicts argument of where moral truths come from also seems plausible, because there must be some underlying values humans follow to ensure the continuation of our species. However, this argument still fails to provide an absolute scale of moral values. While it does suggest what moral truths may be, this is stated as the common ones between all cultures, but this still does not rank societies as better or worse. The same consequences fall from this argument as it does from the cultural relativism argument. In the end, I believe this is still an argument of relativity.

I believe the cultural relativity argument is the stronger argument and has better reasoning that there are no moral truths. While Benedict does point out that this argument is not sound, he still does not show that the argument is false. Instead, this argument is missing some premises which would make it sound and valid. Ultimately, Benedict ends up making a relative argument. While there is an agreement that there is a relation on the set of all cultural moral values, there is no explanation of a partial ordering on cultures, which would be required for moral truths to exists. While Benedict suggests that there may be moral truths based on the morals which all cultures follow, this is not a sound argument. The rejection of this argument is similar to his rejection of cultural relativism. Even if all cultures share a similar moral value, this does not make that value a truth. It is entirely possible that all cultures share an incorrect moral value. Without the presence of an independent moral scale, there will never be a sound argument that moral truths exist, as the cultural relativism argument can still be made. This leads that even though all cultures share a similar moral value, this is still a relative value taken by the human race. There must be some moral scale independent of all societies and humans in order for there to be absolute moral truths.

The consequences Benedict provides are true, however as a cultural relativist, I don’t see them as a bad thing, but instead support cultural relativism argument. To respond to his first consequence, no society can be seen as inferior to another, Benedict suggests we would have to accept all cultures, including those which call for slavery and genocide. While I agree these are bad, they are bad because the society we live in says so. There is no independent scale saying those are bad, it is simply a difference in opinion. If we put the actions of Hitler in the context of the Romans or the conquests of Alexander The Great, there is little moral differences between the three. All three had the goal of world domination, all three went to war against neighboring cultures, some even committing or attempting to commit genocide. This implies that criticism of Hitler’s actions is yet again a relativist argument. Similar arguments can be made for the other two consequences Benedict provides for cultural relativism. While I think Benedict points out some good flaws in cultural relativism, he is not able to show this argument is false.

Until an absolute independent moral code is discovered, the argument of the existence of moral truths will remain unanswered and opened to debate. Cultural relativism suggests that there are no moral truths. This issue with this argument is that it is not sound. However, that also does not make the argument false. However, since the argument is not sound, it cannot be taken as a correct answer to the question. While this problem remains, cultural relativism will not be able to completely answer this issue.