

THE PROBLEM WITH CULTURAL RELATIVISM

As any historian, sociologist, or anthropologist could tell you, different cultures, religious groups, and subcultures often have different views about ethical matters:

- Different societies have different views about sex (monogamy vs. polygamy, views on homosexuality, etc.), eating (many societies restrict certain sorts of animal products), and treatment of the dead (burial vs. cremation).
- Most modern democratic societies hold that women and men are morally equal, that people should have substantial levels of freedom of religion and speech, and that people have a *moral* right to participate in governing themselves (by voting). However, other societies have laws and customs that restrict the rights of women, enforce laws that are explicitly religious in nature, and reject democratic decision-making. In some societies, things such as homosexuality or adultery can be punishable by death, and female circumcision remains common.
- Infanticide (the killing of infants) is widely condemned in most modern societies. However, it was widely practiced by many societies in the past. Female infanticide has been especially common, especially in hunter-gatherer societies.
- Until relatively recently, forcibly capturing and enslaving people from different races/tribes/religions/etc. was widely practiced. Most (though not all) religious, political, and philosophical leaders in these societies seemed to have little problem with it (or, at least, they didn't seem to say much in opposition to it).

Given these cultural differences, **cultural relativists** have proposed that what legitimately counts as “ethical” or “moral” behavior varies from culture to culture. According to James Rachels’s essay “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism”, cultural relativists believe the “that there is no such thing as universal truth in ethics; there are only the various cultural codes, and nothing more. Moreover, our own code has no special status; it is merely one among many.” Rachels argues that culturally relativism is FALSE (as well as harmful), and ought to be rejected. In this lesson, we’ll be looking at both cultural relativism and Rachels’ arguments against it, in a bit more detail.

WHAT DO CULTURAL RELATIVISTS BELIEVE? WHY DO THEY BELIEVE IT?

“One thing I would really like to tell them [first graders] about is cultural relativity. I didn't learn until I was in college about all the other cultures, and I should have learned that in the first grade. A first grader should understand that his or her culture isn't a rational invention; that there are thousands of other cultures and they all work pretty well; that all cultures function on faith rather than truth; that there are lots of alternatives to our own society. Cultural relativity is defensible and attractive. It's also a source of hope. It means we don't have to continue this way if we don't like it.” (Kurt Vonnegut, *Playboy Magazine*).

Getting clear on “Cultural Relativism.” While the basic idea that “morality varies by culture” is pretty common, what exactly is this supposed to mean? As Rachels notes, cultural relativists seem to have a number of things in mind (I’ve altered his list a bit):

1. People from different cultures, as a matter of fact, have different ethical codes.
2. There is no “objective” or “universal” standard by which we could say that one’s culture code is better/worse than any other.
3. Our own culture’s moral code isn’t any better (or worse) than those of other cultures. If we try to judge the behavior of people in other cultures, we are just showing our ignorance.
4. A culture’s “code” really does determine what is right and wrong in that culture, even if individuals disagree with this.
5. We should adopt an “attitude of tolerance” toward the practices of other cultures.

The important thing to note here is that *some* of these things might be true (or almost true) while others might be false. For example, we might think that 1 is true, 2-4 are false, and the truth of 5 depends on how one interprets it (in fact, this is what many critics of cultural relativism have argued). So, even if we end up rejecting cultural relativism (as Rachels does), it doesn’t mean we have to say that it is wrong about *everything*.

The Cultural Differences Argument. Defenders of cultural relativism often seem to have in mind an argument like the following:

1. Premise: There is widespread disagreement about morality between cultures. For example, some cultures approve of infanticide while others disapprove it.
2. Conclusion: So, there is no objective fact of the matter. What counts as “right” and “wrong” depends on one’s culture.

The problem with this argument is that it is **invalid**. That is, it has a bad *form*—one can believe the premise is true, and still hold that conclusion is false. To show this, we can produce a **counterexample** (an argument of the same form with a *true* premise and a *false* conclusion):

1. Premise: There is widespread disagreement about science between cultures. For example, some cultures believe the earth is flat, while others believe it is round.
2. Conclusion: So, there is no objective fact of the matter. What counts as “true” and “false” about the shape of the earth depends on one’s culture.

What does this show? By producing a counterexample, we have NOT shown that cultural relativism is false. We've merely shown that one popular *argument* for it doesn't work. This is an important distinction—for example, you might *agree* with someone's political or moral views, while still thinking his or her *reasons* for holding them ("I just blindly believe whatever my parents told me") are not very good.

PROBLEMS FOR CULTURAL RELATIVISM

"I'm here to say to you this morning that some things are right and some things are wrong. Eternally so, absolutely so. It's wrong to hate. It always has been wrong and it always will be wrong. It's wrong in America, it's wrong in Germany, it's wrong in Russia, it's wrong in China. It was wrong in 2000 B.C., and it's wrong in 1954 A.D. It always has been wrong, and it always will be wrong. It's wrong to throw our lives away in riotous living. No matter if everybody in Detroit is doing it, it's wrong. It always will be wrong, and it always has been wrong. It's wrong in every age and it's wrong in every nation. Some things are right and some things are wrong, no matter if everybody is doing the contrary." (Martin Luther King, Rediscovering Lost Values)

The majority of ethicists disagree with cultural relativism. There are a few reasons for this:

1. **It means that one can never legitimately *praise* or *blame* the behavior of people from other cultures, no matter what.** According to cultural relativism, we can never justifiably say things like "It is morally wrong for majorities (in other societies) to engage in genocidal campaigns against minority" or "Societies that provide support for new mothers are morally admirable." All we can say is "I guess other societies do things different than us. Things that seem morally horrible to me are just fine for them, and my society can't/shouldn't learn from the things that seem good."
2. **It means that the "majority view" is correct and good *by definition*, and that social reformers trying to change this view are always wrong and bad.** Cultural relativists hold that right and wrong are *completely determined* by cultural approval. These means, for example, those social reformers like Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and so on were *wrong* when they tried to change peoples' views, at least if the majority disagreed with them at first. This is true for *every* issue: majority opinion determines the morality of abortion, animal rights, gay rights, and so on. In every case, those who are trying to change things are wrong by definition.
3. **It entails that it is *impossible* for societies to make moral progress.** Finally, cultural relativism holds that a given society's morals are always "correct" (by definition), there is no way the society can ever make progress (or get worse). This means, for example, that U.S. decisions to eliminate slavery, to expand the vote to women, and so on weren't *morally* any better than what they had been doing all along. Things have never gotten any better (or worse), and they never will.

WHAT CULTURAL RELATIVISM GETS WRONG (AND RIGHT)

It might seem we are stuck between a rock and a hard place: the cultural relativists note that there is widespread moral disagreement (which they argue makes objective, universal morality kind of unbelievable), while their critics note cultural relativism, if taken seriously, has some pretty absurd consequences: e.g., it turns out that Hitler was a good guy, and MLK wasn't. However, this isn't the end of story. As it turns out, the main factual claim of cultural relativism (that different cultures have massive disagreements about *values*) aren't entirely true:

1. **Not all difference in BEHAVIOR imply a difference in VALUES or MORALS.** As Rachels points out, it might *seem* like societies that allow infanticide value infants less than those that forbid it, or that those embracing vegetarianism value non-human life more. However, these differing behaviors might actually have nothing to do with values. For example, in societies that practiced (female) infanticide (a) conditions were very harsh, there was no birth control, and a mother who chose to raise all her children to adulthood might very well see them all die (from lack of food, etc.), and (b) these societies *also* tended to have very high rates of male mortality (due to mostly to violent conflict with other tribes). Similarly, vegetarian societies are often associated with religious beliefs that animals have *souls* or *minds*, while meat-eating societies often have religious beliefs that entail animals are something *tools* or *machines*. If this is the case, then the people in these societies actually *agree* on values; they just disagree on how best to practice them.
2. **Societies actually AGREE on many important moral issues (because they have to).** There are certain moral rules that almost *every* society will have to have, at least if they want to survive. For example, there need to prohibitions against murder and theft, and people need to generally be honest. Similarly, it's pretty tough to find examples of cultures that don't value character traits like courage or generosity. Cultural relativism seems most plausible when we focus on differences, but it's important to remember that are many, many important moral norms that seem pretty "universal."

What Cultural Relativism Gets Right. So far, we've focused on the problems with cultural relativism, and why it doesn't "work" as a moral theory. However, this doesn't mean that the moral diversity of different cultures has nothing to teach us! In particular, it is important to remember the following: **No matter how strongly you *feel* about something, you can't *assume* that the beliefs and practices of your own culture are superior to those of other cultures.** As children, we quite naturally identify strongly with the moral values of our parents, religions, peer groups, etc. We internalize these values in the form of "gut feelings" concerning right and wrong behavior. What cultural relativism teaches us is that we should be very, very careful about assuming that these feelings are correct when others disagree with them, since those with *different* upbringings have other, equally strong gut feelings opposed to our own.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Consider a few of the following historical and current cultural practices. Would you say that these practices are *morally admirable* (“Good! Maybe even better than the ones we have.”), *morally blameworthy* (“Bad! This culture ought to have adopted different practices. If we could do so effectively, it would be OK for us to try to intervene and stop this practice.”) or *morally neutral* (“It’s different from the way we do things, but it’s a morally irrelevant difference.”). Explain and defend your answer. (Feel free to do some outside research.)

1. Laws outlawing or restricting homosexuality, premarital sex, masturbation, etc.
2. Laws outlawing pornography or hate speech
3. Laws allowing marriage at or around puberty (12 to 14 years old)
4. Legalized polygamy
5. Legal, moral, or religious rules restricting women’s or minorities’ access to education, employment, political participation, etc.
6. Forced circumcision of female infants and children
7. Legalized marriage among first cousins
8. Laws requiring attendance at religious services, or other sorts of religious observance
9. Corporal punishment (such as caning or whipping) for some crimes, instead of prison time.