

Cultural and ethical relativism are two widespread theories that are used to explain the differences among cultures and their ethics and morals. The two similar theories describe the moral, ethical, and societal differences that diverse cultures experience. James Rachels summarizes the former theory into one brief statement: “Different cultures have different moral codes.” (Rachels, 18) Ethical relativism, as described by Ruth Benedict, is a similar concept, based specifically on the ethics of a culture and how they are related to those of other cultures. When the two theories are combined, they form a complete theory that some anthropologists and philosophers apply to cultures to describe rituals and actions that differ among them.

However, Rachels does not subscribe to the theory of cultural relativism. Instead, he believes that all cultures have some values in common—that there is less disagreement among cultures than it seems. Benedict has the opposing viewpoint that the morals and ethics of cultures are, in fact, relative. Rather than having a strict set of universal rules that govern the morality of different cultures, Benedict argues that many cultures are at the complete opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to specific areas of culture and lifestyle. Certain aspects of cultures simply cannot be unified under one universal moral code that governs all of the human race.

Both Rachels and Benedict use a plethora of examples to support their analyses. While seen in isolation, each would appear to be correct. However, when combining the two authors’ works, it becomes apparent that each theory has its own flaws. Rachels misses the point when it comes to what morals and other characteristics are universal across all cultures. Benedict does not take into account the points that Rachels addresses about the similarities among cultures. Cultural relativism does, in fact, exist—but not to the extent that Benedict might predict, nor to the extent that Rachels has denied its existence.

In his book, *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, James Rachels argues that cultural relativism

is not the correct explanation for the differences among cultures. To support his argument, he uses multiple examples. One such situation is about the proper way to dispose of the dead: the Greeks favored cremation and the Callatians favored cannibalization. Neither group felt the other was correct. Another situation addresses the Eskimo practice of infanticide. According to Rachels, Eskimo mothers often kill their female babies after birth, without social stigma being attached to the action. The Eskimos are a nomadic tribe whose males are often killed during hunting or from the cold. Therefore, killing female babies at birth helps to keep the population from becoming skewed overwhelmingly female, and helps to reduce the burden on the family during travel.

Using these two examples, Rachels comes up with two general arguments that cultural relativism uses: “Different cultures have different moral codes[; t]herefore, there is no objective ‘truth’ in morality. Right and wrong are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.” (Rachels, 20) He then goes on to say that these arguments are not sound.

In the first example, Rachels argues that, according to cultural relativism, because there is a disagreement between the two cultures, this leads to the conclusion that there could not possibly be a true objectively right procedure for disposing of the dead. Similarly, at face value, many in the United States may feel that Eskimo infanticide is morally abhorrent, Rachels argues that it is actually quite logical. In the second example, he states that cultural relativism supports the notion that because there are differing opinions on the morality of infanticide, that there is again no true objectively moral action with regard to killing babies. Rachels translates cultural relativism into the fact moral ethics are not universal—they are simply a matter of opinion that differs from culture to culture.

Rachels uses another example to support his argument: some people believe that Earth is flat, while others believe that it is roughly spherical. Rachels argues that cultural relativism would continue to support the notion that, because there is a difference of a opinion, there cannot be one truly correct belief. However, it is clear in this case that one is arguing

scientific fact, rather than a possible difference of opinion or a specific code of conduct.

After presenting these two generic rules, Rachels addresses “the consequences of taking cultural relativism seriously”. (Rachels, 21) According to a selection by William Graham Sumner that Rachels quotes, the concept of right and wrong can only be measured against one’s own cultural beliefs. Rachels uses that concept to make three conclusions regarding cultural relativism. The first conclusion is that a member of one culture would not be able to consider any other cultures inferior to their own, as it would not be true—they are simply all different. The second conclusion is that one would be able to determine if something is right or wrong simply by consulting the standards of one’s society, which relates back to the first conclusion in that nothing can be deemed morally wrong by any standards than those in which the action take place. The third conclusion is that the idea of moral progress would be called into doubt, meaning that a culture could not evolve to become even more moral than it once was—as, again, they could never be considered morally wrong by another culture in the first place. (Rachels, 21)

In her article, “A Defense of Ethical Relativism”, Ruth Benedict argues a different way. Benedict supports the notion that the morals, ethics, and actions of different cultures of people are simply the result of many years of cultural evolution, through accidental isolation of and contact with other cultures. According to Benedict, all cultures (and their people) start out with a persuasion in one direction of moral standards. As time goes on, certain actions begin to become congenial, and others, uncongenial.

If a normal member of one culture were to be transplanted into a significantly different culture, they would be considered abnormal in that culture. One example Benedict uses is that of an island of northwest Melanesia. The people there believe that everyone else is using black magic to poison them. According to Benedict, “no woman ever leaves her cooking pot for a moment untended.” In fact, their “polite phrase at the acceptance of a gift is, ‘And if you now poison me, how shall I repay you this present?’” (Benedict, 35) It is a society where no one works together and no one shares with anyone else.

In this society, according to Benedict, there existed a man who was considered crazy. He did not run around killing people at random, as may be expected by someone of Western culture. Rather, he was simply a nice guy who liked to work and be helpful. He had no desire to mask his true personality and conform to the tendencies of his culture. He was one who seemed to embody the Christian “model of all virtue”—and yet the men and women in his culture would laugh at him and call him crazy. (Benedict, 36) Were he transplanted into—for instance—the United States, he would be considered normal; in his native land, however, he is abnormal.

Benedict cites another example of a culture-wide action that would seem illogical and immoral to someone of Western culture: that of the Kwakiutl, living on the Northwest Coast (British Columbia) of Canada. There, it was customary to respond to a death of a person by killing another person. It “did not matter whether a relative had died in bed of disease, or by the hand of an enemy”—another would be killed. (Benedict, 36) In one instance, a chief responded to the (apparent) death of his sister and her daughter by gathering a war party and eventually killing seven men and two children while they were sleeping. While it would be considered morally repugnant in our society to feel good after completing such an endeavor, those involved in the war party and the killings felt good upon their return to Sebaa.

Together, the arguments made by both Rachels and Benedict amount to different cultures implementing different moral standards in an attempt to survive as a culture. With the possible exception of the proper treatment of dead bodies, all of the examples cited by both Rachels and Benedict show members of a particular culture performing actions or following certain rules in a method consistent with the belief that doing so will keep the culture moving in a positive direction. While each culturally-specific ritual may be difficult to understand for other cultures, the culture in which it is followed sees it as indispensable and imperative for survival.

Rachels is correct in his arguments that there are fewer differences among cultures than it

seems. He vigorously refutes the theory of cultural relativism using example after example, and general rule after general rule, and in many cases, his analysis is persuasive. One final example that he uses to support his analysis is the difference between cultures that refuse to eat cows and those who do not. Cultures who refuse to eat cows may do so because they feel that, after death, the human spirit inhabits animals, especially cows, so that a cow may be someone's grandmother. As Rachels says, "The difference is in our belief systems, not our values. We agree that we shouldn't eat Grandma; we simply disagree about whether the cow is (or could be) Grandma." (Rachels, 23)

However, Rachels is neglecting one important detail in the conclusions he draws from his previous examples: His latter example about Earth is an argument over scientific fact, while his former two (disposal of the dead and infanticide) are arguments over moral code. There is nothing moral about whether or not Earth is flat—it has been scientifically proven that Earth is an oblate spheroid. There is no way, on the other hand, to scientifically prove (in and of themselves, not with relation to the environment or any other external factor) whether cremation or cannibalization is morally better, or whether infanticide is morally right.

Benedict is even more correct in her analysis of the differences among cultures. There are some characteristics of cultures that are not based upon any universal moral code. There is no rule that states that moral cultures must abide by such a code, and that any culture that does not is not moral. There are some basic moral codes that every culture must abide by to survive—such as the basic condemnation of murder (exceptions, such as self-defense, aside) and the valuation of the young—but as Benedict states, "[...] morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits." (37)

In fact, cultures are only guided by very basic universal moral codes required for survival. In general, senseless murder is to be regarded as a negative action that is detrimental to the furthering of society. Along those same lines, it is imperative that the young of the society be cared for so that they may carry it into the future. After those basic ideas, which are

more ingrained in human beings due to genetic tendencies and a shared evolutionary past than the necessity for universal moral codes, cultures will begin to vary widely. Each culture has its own individual methods to ensure its survival that are not based on any particular tie to the entire human race or its morals, as they are on environmental factors and interactions with other cultures.

Benedict uses extreme examples to support her points. Therefore, it may be arguable that cultural or ethical relativism does not apply to *most* cultures, only to those on the extremities that Benedict cites. However, further evaluation of Benedict's claims shows that any complex example—whether extreme or not—will show some kind of cultural relativism.

Rachels seems to draw most, if not all, of his examples in relation to our Western culture, failing to take into account the extreme examples that Benedict uses. As a result, he makes assumptions on the lack of differences among cultures that should not be made. In fact, there is disagreement even between his examples that show his assumptions are incorrect: He states that we agree that we should not eat our grandmother, when only pages before he discusses the disagreement over eating relatives.

As for the conclusions drawn as a result of combining Rachels' and Benedict's theories, there are few issues that are not addressed. Rachels covers the topics and examples of cultural relativism within the central area of the spectrum, while Benedict covers those at the far ends. The examples Rachels uses are simple, with only one moral conflict in an otherwise "normal" culture. Benedict's examples, on the other hand, use such extreme, broad-scope moral conflicts that they rule every aspect of life in the cultures that they involve. Together, they address the entirety of cultural relativism and what concrete rules lie beneath the everyday actions of members of cultures around the world.

Rachels draws the somewhat-incorrect conclusion that if the theory of cultural relativism is accepted, one would no longer be able to criticize a different culture for its practices. For example, we would not be able to condemn cultures that enslave people or that commit genocide. The fault with this theory lies with the inherent disregard for human life and

human rights that they entail—an act that violates the universal moral codes that underlie all cultures (as established internationally in, for instance, the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*).

The combination of Rachels’ and Benedict’s selections about cultural and ethical relativism address many aspects of the two theories. Each author provides examples to support their particular theory, with many examples serving to refute the other’s theory. However, some examples actually act, when analyzed, to refute that author’s theory and support the other’s. A number of each author’s examples are flawed when compared to the theories attached to them, or vice versa.

Rachels is correct in his belief that there are many aspects of cultures that are not exclusive to specific cultures. For example, Eskimos do not value infanticide when other cultures do not—they simply use it as a means of survival while other cultures do not need to. This specific example addresses the universal moral code of survival that is shared by all cultures. It does not, however, indicate a lack of cultural relativism, as the simple need to conduct infanticide in order to survive may be exclusive to the Eskimo culture.

Similarly, Benedict is correct in her conclusions that many aspects of the lives of people within a culture *are* actually exclusive to that culture. Not every culture has a reason to believe that their fellow members are out to poison them with black magic. In fact, it may be argued that even those cultures that share such a belief do not have any reason to. Either way, however, it is hard to find an underlying factor shared by all cultures that would drive that specific culture to hold that specific belief.

There are definitely universal moral codes that underlie all of the human cultures around the world, as Rachels claims. However, his claims beyond that begin to fall apart, as Benedict’s gain support. Most of the actions that people take, and the things that they do, are not based on any underlying moral code. They are often, as Benedict claims, simply due to habits that have evolved over time to embody the specific culture in which they are conducted. Humans are more creatures of habit than they are of universal morality.