

The American Anthropological Association's Statement on Human Rights, presented to the United Nations in 1947, makes the following claim: "Standards and values are relative to the culture from which they derive so that any attempt to formulate postulates that grow out of the beliefs or moral codes of one culture must to that extent detract from the applicability of any Declaration of Human Rights to mankind as a whole." Similarly, in her *Patterns of Culture*, Ruth Benedict states: "Morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits." These are two different ways of saying that morality is dependent upon the society or culture in which it is enacted.

There is much proof that these arguments are correct. While almost all societies and cultures around the world share certain core beliefs (including the general condemnation of murder), many seemingly-fundamental elements of morality differ among societies and cultures. Rachels uses a humorous example, comparing Western culture to a culture where people believe it is wrong to eat cows, to demonstrate this point: "The difference is in our belief systems, not in our values. We agree that we shouldn't eat Grandma; we simply disagree about whether the cow is (or could be) Grandma." There is a plethora of similar examples, particularly when comparing Western culture to other, unrelated cultures.

Some cultures do not have marriage—mothers and daughters exist, but the concept of a father does not. Similarly, some cultures have a different take on family than Western culture typically does. In Western culture, the family is patriarchal, with the lineage continuing down the father's line. In other cultures, such as the Native American Algonquins, family is based on the mother and her lineage. Additionally, every culture has its own rituals for handling death—some bury, some cremate, some mummify, and some cannibalize. No one of these rituals, per se, is objectively any more moral or immoral than any other one; they are simply a value relative to—and shared by—a specific culture.

However, one may argue that there is, in fact, only one true moral standard. Rachels does

so, saying that simply because two cultures disagree on what is the proper moral standard for a particular issue does not mean that a true moral standard for that issue does not exist. To support his argument, Rachels draws a parallel to those who continue to believe that Earth is flat, even though it has been scientifically proven otherwise. He argues that the disagreement between such a culture and Western culture does not mean that there is no true shape of Earth. It is scientific fact that Earth is relatively round; it is not flat.

And Rachels is correct in making this statement—Earth is not flat, after all—but his analogy is illogical. Believing that Earth is flat is not a moral value, right or wrong; it is simply a belief that is at odds with scientific fact. But rituals associated with burying the dead are related to morality. A culture that buries its dead may believe it is immoral to cremate them, and vice versa. Depending on their cultural beliefs, each would be correct. For one culture, burying the dead is the only moral thing to do; in others, cremation may be the only moral approach; in still others, either may be morally appropriate.

Such moral customs as death rituals—or any rituals at all, really—are completely dependent upon each individual culture and what the majority of the members of that culture believe to be moral or immoral. That is how moral values and customs operate. However, there are some moral values that must exist across all cultures and societies if they are to continue to survive. Murder is fundamentally immoral across all cultures, even if specific instances are considered acceptable. The young must also be valued within each culture or society, as it is the young who must live to become the old. If the young are not valued, the culture or society will soon disappear. Nevertheless, sometimes sacrifices must be made in order ensure the survival of the culture or society in the long run.

Aside from the fundamental exceptions that must be present across all cultures and societies, it is quite clear that morality is completely dependent on whichever society or culture is considering the issue. This results in a difference across cultures which may not be easily resolved or understood among them, but which does not make any one culture better than another.