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## The Challenge of Cultural Relativism Reading Notes

### **2.1 Different Cultures have Different Moral Codes**

14(1-2)- Rachels opens up with Herodotus' story of King Darius of Persia and how he noticed the differences in moral codes during his travels. He explains the differences between the Callatians and the Greeks and how the differences between the cultures should be respected

14-15(2)- By using Herodotus' story as his example, Rachels states that "different cultures have different moral codes"

16(6)- Rachels asserts that to assume that the morals of other cultures mirror our own is naive

### **2.2 Cultural Relativism**

16(7)- Rachels explains that there is no independent standard of right or wrong [different standards are set by each culture]

17(12-13)- Cultural relativists believe we should not judge other cultures for their different moral codes, but we should instead be tolerant of them. However, Rachels raises the question, what if the society favors intolerance? (example: the Nazis) Although, Cultural Relativism states that "the norms of a culture reign supreme within the bounds of the culture itself. Thus, we have no obligation to be tolerant of the Nazis actions once they crossed into other countries with other cultural norms

### **2.3 Cultural Differences Argument**

18(16)- Rachels first questions whether the Cultural Difference Argument is sound and later states that it is not. This is because the conclusion of the Argument does not follow from the premise. Due to this, Rachels asserts that the Cultural Difference Argument is in fact invalid

### **2.4 What Follows from Cultural Relativism**

19(20-22)- William Graham Sumner says that "the only measure of right and wrong is the standards of one's society." This is the basis of Cultural Relativism which states that we should not condemn a society because it is different from our own. That the difference in our morals is due to our different societies and that we should not judge a society on a moral that we do not understand. [I disagree because there are some morals held in different societies that should always be thought of as morally wrong. ex) The Chinese government's oppressive policies

### **2.5 Why there is Less Disagreement than it Seems**

21(29-31)- Rachels explains that while many cultures seem to differ in their views at first glance, that may not always be the case. Rachels uses different examples to explain that it is not always the values of the cultures that differ, but the customs and beliefs of the cultures that make them seem different

21-22(32-35)- Rachels shares new information about the Eskimos and their immoral practices mentioned earlier in the article. When first mentioned, Rachels only revealed that the Eskimos used to practice infanticide. Now, he shares the reasoning behind what seemed a brutal and heartless act. Apparently, infanticide was practiced for different reasons; mainly because they could not sustain all the children. They simply did not want the children to suffer more than necessary. However, Rachels makes it clear that infanticide was always a last resort. With this new information, the morals of the Eskimos which at one time seemed cruel and far from our own, seem more similar to our morals than they did originally

## **2.6 Some Values are Shared by All Cultures**

23-24(36-39)- While some values may differ from culture to culture, there are many values that remain the same universally. As an example, Rachels discusses the idea of a society that based no value on the truth. In such a society, there would be no point in communicating with people because you could not be sure if they were lying or not. People would be unable to communicate properly with one another and without communication, society would cease to exist.

## **2.7 Judging a Cultural Practice to be Undesirable**

25-26(45-52)- Rachels uses the practice of excision to explain why people may find a cultural practice to be undesirable. Rachels states that while many people may find excision to in fact be an undesirable cultural practice, a most people will not condemn it for three reasons: fear of interfering with social customs, feeling tolerant of other cultures, and/or they may not want to express contempt for the society as a whole.

26(52)- According to Rachels, many people fear that if they express contempt for something in a society, it is the same as expressing contempt for the society as a whole. However, this would not be the case. Condemning one part of a society does not mean that you condemn all of the society because the society could have many other fine attributes that would be acceptable

## **2.8 Back to the Five Claims**

28(57)- Rachels asserts that in order to decide if a practice is truly and morally wrong, we need to appeal to an outside source. Rachels' statement is "that it always matters whether a practice promotes or hinders the welfare of the people affected by it" [I strongly agree that this is necessary]

## **2.9 What We Can Learn from Cultural Relativism**

29-30(60-66)- Rachels states that while Cultural Relativism is incorrect, it does teach us some very important things: there is no absolute rational standard and that it is good to keep an open mind when it comes to different cultures and their differing morals

31(69)- Cultural Relativism helps us to understand that many things we find normal are only because they are normal for our own culture