

Philosophy –
evaluate rachels
claims against
cultural relativism



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In the long raging battle of metaethics, exists the debate between cultural relativism and a more absolutist approach towards morals. In this rapidly changing and globalized world, a better understanding of ethics is more crucial than ever. It is clear that there are many diverse cultures all around the world with differences ranging from how we drink our coffee, to how we bury our dead.

This begs the question, what do we make of the differing moralities that we find through different cultures? Are there universal morals that should be followed, as an absolutist would argue? Or is the concept of right and wrong dependent on our cultural teachings? Cultural relativism is plausible yet it leaves many unanswered questions, similarly, moral realism attempts to answer these questions yet does so by opening up more questions. Those opposing cultural relativism (Rachels, 1986; Rachels and Rachels, 2010; Thomson, 1990; Pojman, 2008; Schick and Vaughn, 2010) argue that it's view on ethics and morality is too simple and doesn't take into account the universal moral rules which transcend culture. Alternatively, those in favour of relativism (Park, 2011; Harman, 2008) would argue that there are no universal moral values that govern behavior as the values between different cultures is so extreme that the only explanation could be due to different cultural belief systems. Cultural relativists view ethics as an entity, which operates within cultures, where every culture has differing morals, beliefs and traditions. This of course means that there are no universal truths in ethics. Thus, a "moral agents behavior is to be evaluated in reference to [their] culture" (Park, 2011) where "what makes an action right is that it's approved by ones culture" (Schick and Vaughn, 2010).

Rachels and Rachels (2010), further reiterate this by saying that “ if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then, that action is right, at least within that society”. Rachels (1986) uses the different viewpoints of the Greeks and Callatians as an example where the Greeks believed it was wrong to eat the dead, where the Callatians believed it was right to eat the dead thus neither are right or wrong but rather a matter of opinion between cultures. For Rachels (1986), this is where the first issue with the cultural differences argument is raised. He says that it does not follow that just because two cultures have a difference of opinion does not mean that there is no objective truth in the matter and that “ it could be that one [culture] was simply mistaken”. From this idea, he comes to the conclusion that the fundamental mistake the argument makes is that it “ attempts to derive a substantive conclusion about a subject (morality) from the mere fact that people disagree about it” (Rachels, 1986).

Thus he calls into the question of absolute moral truths. These absolute ‘ truths’ are argued by Thomson (1990) and Schick and Vaughn (2010) who believe that there exists moral truths, which are followed by almost all cultures. They use the example “ equals should be treated equally” and “ unnecessary suffering is wrong” in which violating these principles may result in an immoral act regardless of culture. Park (2011) however comes to the aid of relativism saying, “ the existence of universal moral rules is not a strike against cultural relativism”.

He explains that a moral rule is universal only because it is in line with all cultures and not just because it is in line “ with an absolutely right standard”.

Cultural relativism suggests a simple test for determining what is right and <https://assignbuster.com/philosophy-evaluate-rachels-claims-against-cultural-relativism/>

what is wrong: all one has to do is ask whether the action is in accordance with the code of ones society” (Rachels, 1986). Rachels (1986) goes on to criticize cultural relativism for it’s extremely simplistic view on judging whether an action is right or wrong. He says that the implications of this are incredibly disturbing as he says it not only stops us from criticizing the codes of other societies, but also our own. He uses an example Hitler to illustrate that we could no longer judge his actions as immoral as they were approved by his culture.

Park (2011) actually backs this up by saying that a relativist would stand their ground. He says “ Hitlers acts sound immoral to us because our intuition is influenced by non-Nazi culture, which we are implicitly using as the moral framework to evaluate his acts”. Park (2011) cleverly uses this point to turn the argument around on the realist view to say that if Hitler had of been a cultural relativist himself, he would not have attacked the Jews in the first place. One of the biggest issues raised by cultural relativism is the idea that moral progress is impossible.

Rachels (1986) claims that if we are to believe relativism, then we can no longer say that we have achieved any moral progress. He asks us to consider the example of womens former place in society in which they had no vote, were not allowed jobs and were usually under the control of men. He says that most of this has changed and hence most of us consider it as social progress, however relativism would not. But by what standard are we to consider a new way to be better than before (Rachels, 1986)? Schick and Vaughn (2010) also support Rachels view saying that if relativism is to be embraced then “ social reformers couldn’t claim that a socially approved <https://assignbuster.com/philosophy-evaluate-rachels-claims-against-cultural-relativism/>

practice is wrong because if society approved of it, it must be right” and thus “ reformers are always (morally) wrong since they go against the cultural standards”.

Park (2011) however says that a relativist would argue that a social reformist was “ indeed wrong to oppose slavery, but he would add that they were wrong with respect to the past culture and right with respect to the present culture”. Again, he says that with respect to slavery, the practice would never have occurred had the masters been cultural relativists in the first place. Park (2011) goes one step further to say that although we have moved toward equality, a relativist would argue that equality is a value that is a moral framework of present society and that “ if we use the past culture as our moral frame of reference, we would have an opposite intuition that we are now further from the absolutely right standard and hence we made moral regress rather than progress”. Rachels (1986) goes on to argue, “ there are some moral rules that all societies will have in common, because those rules are necessary for society to exist”. He uses the example of whether or not a society could exist without the prohibition of murder.

In this society he claims that no one would ever feel safe resulting in “ individuals trying to become as self-sufficient as possible”. Thus, people might “ band together in smaller groups with others they could trust not to harm them”, he then uses this as his prime argument. This new group of people would essentially be forming a smaller society that did acknowledge a rule against murder and thus making prohibition of murder “ a necessary feature of all societies”. Societies may differ in what they regard as “ legitimate exceptions to the rules” however not to the prohibition of murder
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itself. Rachels (1986) puts forward some convincing arguments against cultural relativism, and he even states a few lessons that could be learnt from it.

Unfortunately for Rachels however, all his issues with cultural relativism can be refuted and even reversed to create more problems for moral realists.

Park (2011) believes that “ it is not clear whether it is cultural relativism or absolutism that has a more hazardous impact on our daily lives”.

Alternatively, although Rachels' claims to moral realism certainly makes questions of ethics much more tenable, we are still left with the obvious; which, if any, morals ' transcend' the bounds and constrains of human behaviour to make them absolute truths? Although he may be pointing out some obvious flaws in the relativism argument, he is also completely overlooking those of the realist.