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The Cultural Differences Argument and Geography: Is This a Relevant Comparison?

Confucius, one of the most popular thinkers of all time, once said, “The object of the superior man is truth.”¹ The search for truth is something that has surely dominated much of the reflection of great thinkers as well as everyday people. One of the most controversial parts of this truth is the understanding of what is right and wrong and whether that standard is universal. In response to this question, many theories have been formulated in an attempt to explain the intricacies of and describe the meanings behind morality. One such theory is cultural relativism. Under this broad umbrella of thoughts on moral thinking is the cultural differences argument, which concludes that any society’s own moral beliefs are just as right as any other society’s. In his book *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, author James Rachels describes this argument and soon after, dismisses it. However, while Rachels uses different reasons to justify his rejection of the theory, his reasons are premature, because he uses an irrelevant example in comparing morality to geography. He does not appear to consider the controversy surrounding ethics, the subjectivity of the field, or the lack of any undisputable proof to conclusively defend any current theory of morality.

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Cultural relativism holds the position that there is not one universal truth in ethics and that the social construction of a given society determines its moral code. In his

¹ Quotation retrieved from World Wide Web at http://quoteland.com/topic.asp?CATEGORY_ID=146.

25 description of the theory, Rachels says that cultural relativism says that “there is no such
thing as universal truth in ethics; there are only the various cultural codes, and nothing
more” (p. 18). This statement in explanation of the theory allows the reader to grasp its
core idea. While Rachels ultimately disagrees with this concept, it is a widely held
viewpoint. Some anthropologists even list this as a goal for their field, calling this notion
30 a “fundamental research tool.”² To describe support for the theory, Rachels describes the
cultural differences argument.

The cultural differences argument is an argument that cultural relativists use to
show that the theory stems from facts. This is the argument as written by Rachels:

- (1) Different cultures have different moral codes.
- 35 (2) Therefore, there is no objective “truth” in morality. Right and wrong are
only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture. (p. 20)

Rachels is right to say that it is presumptuous to say that because people disagree over the
truth, then there can be no truth at all. However, Rachels’s criticism takes the form of an
example that seems to ignore many basic qualities of morality.

40 In order to object to the cultural differences argument, Rachels uses an example.
He explains that there are people in small, remote places of the world who firmly believe
that the world is flat. This deviation from our common thinking that the world is spherical
does not mean that there is no truth. This disparity only means that some people are
wrong. Rachels says that we would never question the objective truth of geography based
45 on this disagreement and therefore we should not make the same deduction when dealing
with morality. His conclusion is simply not substantial.

² Serena Nanda and Richard L. Warmus, *Cultural Anthropology*, 6th ed. (Wadsworth, 1998).

The first reason that geography cannot be compared to morality is that there is a great deal of controversy surrounding the area of morality. People argue, go to court, and sometimes engage in wars in order to protect their beliefs about what is morally right or wrong. Rachels is mistaken if he feels like the area of geography is a notable comparison for such a subject matter. While I will admit that geography may have been more controversial in earlier centuries, the truths claimed by this modern field are widely accepted and rarely debated. For example, there have been hundreds of cases just within this year alone over matters such as abortion, child pornography, murder, and other moral issues that people pursue. On the contrary, I have yet in my lifetime to hear of any case over a geographical debate. This great difference should have been considered.

Another consideration should have been the subjectivity of morality. There is not one opinion about morality, rather there are indefinitely many opinions held by people from all different parts of the world. These decisions are personal: they aren't based purely on facts or research. Ethical judgments are based on a countless number of influences that are unique to each person. This is not so for geography. Most of us do not go out and investigate the logistics behind these predetermined "truths" in order to believe them. We accept geographical data as matters of fact with little or no involvement at all. This distinction is something Rachels should address. People in foreign tribes accept the geographical information available to them because they are probably not as technologically advanced as we are. They do not have the same resources on which to base their opinions when it comes to such scientific matters. However, they are not as limited when it comes to moral questions and information. In essence, we all have the

70 same amount of information when it comes to morality. We are all faced with perceived good and bad and are free to make individual conclusions based on that awareness.

75 Finally, Rachels does not acknowledge that there is proof in the field of geography. Thanks to modern technology, we are able to actually fly into outer space and retrieve a picture of our planet from afar. However, we are incapable now, and probably will remain incapable far into the future, of retrieving such proofs on the matters of morality. We are basically feeling our way around in the dark. Prominent thinkers may develop a theory, but even those are just their educated guesses as to how the world works or should work. This lack of proof draws a serious border between issues of ethics and issues of geography. Scientists are constantly coming up with new and improved ways of looking at the world and investigating our planet. Thinkers do not really become
80 “improved” over time. They may have more material from which to formulate their hypotheses, but they are not always better informed than early philosophers. The fact that we have proof of what geographers are telling us is something Rachels should have thought of when comparing these two fields.

85 In response to these criticisms of his conclusion, I think Rachels would say he was merely using geography as a very simple example that was easy to understand. He will most likely feel that his choice was made with his audience in mind and that there are numerous other examples that are just as effective that he could have used which would have made the same point.

90 My final response to this would be that he did use just that kind of example in a previous paragraph before comparing the cultural differences argument to geography. He used an example about the Greeks and the Callatians and their opinions on eating the

deceased members of a society. The Greeks believed that this was wrong and the Callatians not only believed this was right, they acted upon it. Therefore, there are two very different moral positions about what should be done with the body of a dead loved one. Rachels asks, “Does it follow, from the mere fact that they disagreed, that there is no objective truth in the matter? No, it does not follow” (p. 24). He then proceeds to the comparison of morality and geography. So, in a sense, he has only been able to point out other examples of moral disagreement while he does not show that one is right and one is wrong. Perhaps eating the dead is, in fact, right for the Callatians and wrong for the Greeks. This would mean that the cultural differences argument and cultural relativism as a whole had benefited from these comments that Rachels makes.

In conclusion, James Rachels’s remarks about the cultural differences argument fall short because they fail to recognize the controversy, subjectivity, and lack of proof involved in morality. He uses an incompatible example in order to disprove a theory that would otherwise be much harder to invalidate. Furthermore, if he were to argue that there are more examples concerning morality that would show that there is a right and wrong, then he would have to know the standard for right and wrong. Since he is unable to admit that there is a universal truth and he knows it, his objection to this argument is insufficient.