Application of Ethical Reasoning

Cultural Ethical Relativism
The Reading

“The Challenge of Cultural Relativism,” by James Rachels. This selection comes from Rachels’ book *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. 
Purposes of Case Study

- To illustrate some of the basic elements of ethical reasoning in use.
- To encourage you to think critically about arguments – both those you may have already heard and those that may be new to you.
- To model a reasoned and deliberative approach to a “hot button” issue.
Cultural Ethical Relativism

Critical Analysis
What is Cultural Ethical Relativism (CER)?

- Rachels provides a list of six distinct claims that often mingle under the umbrella of CER – see pages 22-23.

- The core claim for our purposes is the claim that “the idea of universal truth in ethics…is a myth” (p.22).
CER: A Definition

- The theory that there are no ethical truths that hold for all people at all times, but that what is right within a society is determined by the moral code (norms) of that society (p.23).

- If the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action is right, at least within that society (p.23).
CER: Always ask “for whom?”

- Proponents of CER maintain that whenever you encounter an ethical judgment, you must always ask “for whom?” It is impossible to determine whether a given ethical judgment is true without knowing the answer to the question, “For whom?”
An Example

• Ethical judgment: “Eating the flesh of a dead person is wrong.”

• CER maintains that we cannot determine whether this judgment is true unless we know “for whom” it is meant to apply.

For the Callatians? Then the judgment is false because their cultural norms sanction eating the dead.

For the Greeks? Then the judgment is true because their cultural norms prohibit eating the dead.
Ethical Truth is in the Eye of the Culture

- The very same action (eating the flesh of a dead person) might be right in one culture and wrong in another culture.
  - Or within one culture at different times.

- The very same ethical judgment (Eating the flesh of a dead person is wrong) might be true relative to one culture and false relative to another culture.
  - Or within one culture at different times.
Important Point About CER

- Notice that CER is a universal claim. It holds that there are no universally valid moral principles or standards.

- In order to render CER false, all one would need to do is identify one universally valid moral principle or standard.
  - One can admit that many (most) moral principles are the products of culture without endorsing CER.
Cultural Ethical Relativism

Critical Evaluation
While there are important lessons to learn from reflecting on CER, the core holding of the theory should be rejected.
Rachels’ Argument Strategy

Rachels employs four distinct strands of argument in support of his thesis:

• Strand #1: A common argument given in defense of CER is “not sound.”
• Strand #2: The implications of endorsing CER are highly problematic and do not cohere well with our other considered beliefs.
• Strand #3: Several of the most common motivations for embracing CER are misguided.
• Strand #4: There are good reasons to believe that there are at least some inter-cultural value universals.
Argument Strand #1: A Common Argument for CER

The Cultural Differences Argument
Why Believe CER?

➢ One of the most common arguments given for accepting CER is what Rachels refers to as “The Cultural Differences Argument.”

➢ Inspiration for that argument likely comes from the following rather obvious observation…
Inspiration for Cultural Differences Argument

- Truism: Different cultures do things differently.
- This applies to their ethical codes and norms.
1) Different cultures have different moral codes.

2) Therefore, there is no objective “truth” in morality. Right and wrong are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.

This conclusion means that there are no ethical truths that hold for all people at all times. And this is the “core claim” of cultural ethical relativism.
Evaluation of the Cultural Differences Argument

- Rachels argues that the Cultural Differences Argument is “not sound” (p.24).
- Recall that in order to be sound, an argument must:
  - Be deductively valid (i.e., IF the premises are true, then the conclusion MUST be true); and
  - Have all true premises.
- If an argument is “not sound,” then, it fails on at least one of these grounds.
True Premise?

- The premise of the Cultural Differences Argument (i.e., different cultures have different moral codes, that moral opinions vary across cultures) certainly seems to be true.

- The disciplines of sociology and anthropology provide abundant evidence that moral codes differ between cultures.
Deductively Valid?

➢ Since the premise of the argument is true, Rachels’ claim that the argument is “not sound” must mean that the argument is not deductively valid. This means:

• The premise, even if true (which we are admitting it is), does not guarantee the truth of the conclusion.
• One can admit that different cultures have different moral codes, yet also hold that there IS at least one ethical truth that holds for all people at all times. How? Consider the following analogy…
Different cultures have different beliefs about the shape of the earth.

So, we could formulate this argument...
The Geographical Differences Argument

1) Different cultures have different beliefs about the shape of the earth.
2) Therefore, there is no objective truth about the shape of the earth. Geographical beliefs are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.
What’s gone wrong?
The Possibility of Mistake

- Just because cultures disagree about the shape of the earth does not guarantee that there is no objective truth about the shape of the earth. After all, one culture (or both) could be mistaken.
- Similarly, just because cultures disagree about moral principles or standards does not guarantee that there is no objective truth about moral principles or standards. After all, one culture (or both) could be mistaken.
The Core Problem

- The Cultural Differences Argument attempts to move from the fact that people have different opinions or beliefs concerning a given subject matter to the conclusion that there is no objective truth concerning the subject matter.

- The opponent of CER maintains that there is at least one universal ethical truth that holds for all people at all times; not that all cultures believe this, recognize this, accept this, etc.
Argument Strand #2: Problematic Implications of CER

If CER is true, then...trouble.
An Appeal to Consistency and Coherence

- First, think through the implications of CER: if you accept CER, then, as a matter of consistency, what else must you accept?
- Second, consider how well those implications cohere with your other considered beliefs.
  - If they cohere well, CER is strengthened.
  - If they do not cohere well, CER is weakened.
- Rachels identifies three key implications of CER...
Implication #1

- If CER is true, then we are unable to judge any ethical norms of any culture as ethically inferior or superior to any of the ethical norms of any other culture.
- This follows because CER rejects the existence of any universal ethical principles, standards, or truths that might supply the basis for such inter-cultural comparative judgments.
Problem: Lack of Coherence

- This implication means that we cannot judge cultures that have norms permitting, say, genocidal practices or slavery, as ethically inferior to those with norms prohibiting them.
This means that we cannot judge cultures that have norms protecting basic human rights as ethically superior to those that do not.

vs.

“NEVER WAS SO MUCH OWED BY SO MANY TO SO FEW”

THE PRIME MINISTER
Important Point About Implication #1

- We can, of course, invoke our own cultural ethical principles and standards to condemn genocide and slavery and praise human rights. However, CER forces us to recognize that “the moral code of our own society has no special status; it is merely one among many” (p.23).

- Moreover, the culture engaging in genocide or slavery or human rights violations will appeal to its own cultural norms sanctioning these very same practices.

- CER precludes you from ranking these different moral codes and leads you to conclude, “Slavery is wrong for us, but it is right for them.”
Implication #2

- If CER is true, then you would determine whether an action is right or wrong by consulting the existing code (or norms) of the society.

- This might be done by careful observation of how people act or by careful observation of the norms to which they make reference. This might be done by taking a poll…
This follows from CER because CER maintains that there is nothing beyond cultural norms that might supply the basis of ethical principles or standards of evaluation. Cultural norms are all we have to consult.
Problem: Lack of Coherence

First, observation or poll taking can reveal what is believed to be right or wrong within a given culture at a given time, but this does not tell us whether what is believed to be right or wrong within that culture is, in fact, right or wrong.

- Just because something is believed to be the case does not mean that it is the case. (Recall “flat earth.”)
- In general, we do not equate “X is true” with “X is believed to be true.”

Second, consider your own experience. Moral debate is not put to an end by the citation of polling data.

- The majority in the poll could be… wrong!
Problem: Lack of Coherence

Third, it is surely not incoherent to ask, “Is this cultural norm right?” Or to engage in reflection such as, “My culture says it is right to do X but is it really right to do X?”

CER implies that the above question/reflection is, in the end, incoherent. If the cultural norm says X is right, then X is right for that culture.

CER implies that the woman in the picture is automatically wrong! After all, she is opposing a well established cultural norm! And that norm is definitive of what is right within that culture. Her protest is unethical!
Implication #3

- If CER is true, then there is no such thing as moral progress (reform) or moral regress (degeneration)…only change in mores/norms; the replacement of one set of norms with another different set of norms.

- Again, this follows because CER rejects the existence of any universal ethical principles or standards that might supply the basis for judgments of ethical progress or ethical degeneration over time.
Problem: Lack of Coherence

➢ But: The U.S. Constitution of 2008 is not simply different from the U.S. Constitution of 1800; it is better. The 13\textsuperscript{th} Amendment was an improvement!
But: The enactment of various civil rights laws does not represent merely moral change, but moral progress.
But: The replacement of a cultural norm in which women are the property of their husbands with a cultural norm in which women are free and equal moral persons represents moral advancement, not simply moral change.
In the end, CER seems to imply that cultural norms cannot be mistaken or false. This, in turn, means:

• If cultural norms are established by the beliefs and practices of the majority, then the majority is always right. There can be no “tyranny of the majority.” Really?

• If cultural norms are established by the beliefs and practices of those with power, then those with power cannot be mistaken. “Might makes right.” Really?

• In ethics, we have nothing to learn from other cultures and other cultures have nothing to learn from us. Really?
Argument Strand #3: Some Misguided Motivations

The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions
First Common Motivation for CER

- CER helps us avoid “moral imperialism” – i.e., seeking to impose by force our ethical code and norms on others.
Misguided because:

- We should distinguish ethical condemnation and ethical judgment from forceful interference.
- There may well be cases where forceful intervention is ethically justified (e.g., to prevent genocide).
- If the norms of a culture approve of moral imperialism, then moral imperialism is right for that culture.
Second Common Motivation for CER

- CER promotes tolerance.
Misguided because:

- This assumes that the culture in question values tolerance. If the culture does not value tolerance but rather intolerance, then intolerance of others is right for that culture.

- The motivation assumes tolerance is a universal ethical principle or virtue. If correct, then this amounts to a refutation of CER! CER maintains that universal ethical principles or virtues do not exist—including tolerance!
Third Common Motivation for CER

- CER helps us respect “the other.”
Misguided because:

- We should distinguish between respecting the other and affirming all aspects of the other.
  
  ✓ I respect my mother. I do not agree with her every belief or value. 😊

- Again, this assumes that the culture in question values respect for the other. If the culture does not value respect for the other, then not respecting the other is right for that culture.
Argument Strand #4: Cross-Cultural Value Universals

The Existence of Culture Presupposes Certain Values
Values Presupposed by Culture

- Rachels argues that complex culture cannot exist unless certain values are affirmed.
- He identifies three such inter-cultural value universals:
  - Care of offspring
  - Truth telling
  - Prohibitions on violence
Universal Norms, not Universal Compliance

- The fact that complex culture cannot exist without acceptance of these values (norms) does not mean that all members of a given culture **comply** with these norms. There are abusive parents, liars, and violent members of culture.
Universal Norms, not Universal Compliance

- There would be no culture within which to abuse children, lie, or engage in violence unless norms prohibiting these actions were affirmed and generally respected.
Reconnecting to Cultural Differences Argument

- Recall that the premise of the Cultural Differences Argument states that different cultures have different moral codes.
- This premise might very well be true, and yet it also be true that within these different moral codes there are some shared particular moral principles (e.g., restrictions on violence, obligations to care for offspring, etc.).
- All codes can differ even if all codes share certain provisions.
Not All Difference Between Cultures is Difference in Values

Rachels points out that what might look like a difference between cultures in values might, in fact, be the result of a difference in the application of shared values given differences in:

- Non-ethical beliefs (empirical-scientific, theological, etc.)
- Context and circumstance
Recall...

- Truism: Different cultures do things differently.

- But upon reflection, these are simply different ways of providing shelter under different environmental conditions.
- So what is at one level a clear difference (igloo vs. brick home) might represent simply a difference in how to apply a basic shared principle (the value of shelter).
Key Lessons from CER

- Consideration of CER should teach us that to be open minded and not dogmatic in our beliefs.
- Moreover, CER can help us see that many ethical principles and standards are simply the products of culture and nothing more.
- However, one can accept these lessons without endorsing the core claim of CER – namely, that “the idea of universal truth in ethics…is a myth.”
Transition to Small Group Sessions
Small Groups

- The final meeting will take place with your individual seminar instructor.

- If your instructor is teaching more than one section, both sections will meet together.
The Goals Remain the Same

- To illustrate some of the basic elements of ethical reasoning in use.
- To encourage you to think critically about arguments – both those you may have already heard and those that may be new to you.
- To model a reasoned and deliberative approach to a “hot button” issue.