Lecture 4 – Cultural Relativism

I. **What is Ethical Cultural Relativism?**

A. **CULTURAL RELATIVISM:** A moral theory about the nature of morality that contends that moral norms are dictated by socially approved customs.

B. **MORAL STANDARD:** Agreement with Socially Approved Customs

C. Disagreement → Hypothesis: Morals are culturally generated.

D. A challenge to our belief in a universal (transcultural) truth that extends across all cultures. No transcultural moral norms exist.

1. ALL moral values are relative to culture, not merely SOME
2. Ex1: The Jivaro are an Indian clan who lived deep in the Ecuadorian, and neighboring Peruvian Amazon. They are known to be an intensely warlike group, tremendously protective of their freedom and unwilling to subordinate themselves to other authorities. In this fierce society, headhunting and shrinking the heads is a process much revered and honored. In the U.S., chopping off someone’s head then soaking it in some type of jungle juice is not only a criminal offence, but held by almost everyone to be **immoral.**

II. **Types of Cultural Relativism**

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<tr>
<th>GEOGRAPHIC</th>
<th>TEMPORAL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National (U.S., Peruvian Amazon); State (Indiana); City (Indianapolis); Neighborhood (College Park, Woodruff, Nora, Hogville)</td>
<td>Antiquity (homosexuality among Spartans); Middle Ages (inhumane torture); Pre-Civil War (slavery); Generation X</td>
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III. **Different from Excusing**

A. Excusing involves granting *an exemption* from wrongdoing due to certain circumstances.

1. EX2: We excuse children; they are not charged as adults.
2. EX3: Wrong to skip jury duty, but o.k. if you have a valid excuse, e.g. you were shot.

B. CR contends that you **don’t need a valid excuse** for being a Nazi in Germany; you were morally right since it was acceptable.

1. If you grew up in a Nazi culture, then you don’t need to be excused from killing Jews, because what you did was morally correct.
2. Your culture determines rightness and wrongness.

IV. **Different from Ethical Subjectivism**
A. ES contends that individuals create their own moral standards
B. CR contends that your culture creates the moral standards
   1. You do not determine your morals on your own, they are impressed upon you by external influences.
   2. Influenced by your mother, father, country, state, time period.
C. “Truth is in the eye of the beholder” – Who is the Beholder?
   1. ES – Individual
   2. CR - Culture

V. **Different from Sociological Relativism**

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<th>Sociological Relativism</th>
<th>Cultural Relativism</th>
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<td><strong>Type of Ethics</strong></td>
<td>Descriptive Ethics</td>
<td>Normative Ethics</td>
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<td><strong>Task</strong></td>
<td>Description of the ethics of a society – What IS</td>
<td>Evaluation of the ethics of all societies – What Ought</td>
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<tr>
<td>Makes conclusions about right and wrong</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Thinks the other is true</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heavily Accepted</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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VI. **Five Principles Involved in Cultural Relativism**

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<tr>
<td>1. <em>Descriptive Cultural Relativism</em>: Different societies have different moral codes</td>
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<td>2. <em>Plurality or Equality Principle</em>: The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is merely one among many.</td>
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<td>3. <em>Particularity or Relativity Principle</em>: There is no “universal truth” in ethics – that is, there are no moral truths that hold for all peoples at all times. All moral truths are relative.</td>
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<td>4. <em>Cultural Principle/Standard</em>: The moral code of a society determines what is right within a society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action is right, at least within that society.</td>
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<td>5. <em>Tolerance Principle</em>: It is mere arrogance for us to judge the conduct of people outside of society. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the practice of other cultures.</td>
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VII. **The Argument and Consequences for Cultural Relativism**

**A. The Essential Argument for Cultural Relativism**

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<td>P1 If descriptively different cultures have different moral codes, then right and wrong are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.</td>
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<td>P2 Descriptively, different societies/cultures have different moral codes</td>
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<td>C Therefore, there is no objective moral “truth,” only cultural relativism.</td>
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</table>
Normative Fact doesn’t follow from the descriptive one; one could be right, both could be wrong, etc.; Disagreement doesn’t imply no truth, arguments in science.

**OBJECTION 1: Rejection of P1: Cultural Relativism does not follow from Sociological Relativism.**

a. *Fallacy of Ignorance*
   i. Disagreement does not imply there is no answer.
   ii. Ex1: Two cultures disagree about whether the world is flat or spherical. But, it does not follow from their disagreement that the world is not either flat or spherical.

b. *Naturalistic Fallacy*
   i. Is doesn’t imply ought
   ii. Ex1: John is running an errand for his mother doesn’t imply that John ought to run the errand.
   iii. Ex2: You are in class on Friday does not mean that you ought to.

**B. Consequences of Cultural Relativism**

1. *Equality Consequence* – We could no longer say that the customs of societies are morally inferior to our own.
   a. Impotent to criticize other cultures

2. *Consultation Consequence* – We could decide whether our actions are right or wrong just by consulting the standards of society
   a. Infallibility Objection: Perfect Culture

3. *Progress Consequence* – If morality progresses, then it progresses as a result of the culture, and if we progress as individuals, then we better accord with what society says we should do.
   a. Temporal Objection: Better culture than before
   b. Reforming Objection: Individuals that go against the grain.

**VIII. Arguments Against Cultural Relativism**

A. Evaluation of the Essential Argument for Cultural Relativism

1. **Historical OBJECTION 0 (Plausibility):** Holocaust and the Disillusionment
   a. Argument is that some cultures are morally wrong on the basis that the holocaust was so horrific. Beyond justification.
   b. Some Considered Moral Judgments upset the reflective equilibrium.

B. **OBJECTION 2: Pluralism – the Reductio ad absurdum**

1. What are the limits to a culture? Individuals composed of multiple cultures, geographically and temporally.
2. Culture reduces to the individual.
a. Ex1: Political Left/Right/apolitical.  
b. Ex2: Conflicting Cultures: John Kerry – R. Catholic and Democratic

C. Objection 3: CR does not correctly describe how we all make moral judgments  
   1. We don’t consult society every time we make a decision  
   2. In doing what is right and wrong, are we really motivated by what others think or with doing what is really the right thing.

D. Objection 4: There are at least some transcultural values.

   Situational Differences  
   a. Is the difference really found in our moral beliefs, or in our belief system?  
   b. Eskimos that kill children: respect human life, but live in a harsh environment

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<td>P1 If a culture did not take care of its young, the young would not survive, and the culture would become extinct.</td>
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<td>P2 Human infants are helpless and cannot survive if they are not given extensive care for a period of years.</td>
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<td>C Therefore, there is objective moral “truth,” namely that every cultural must take care of its young.</td>
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<th>Argument for Transcultural Value of Telling the Truth</th>
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<td>P1 If a culture did not have at least some value for telling the truth, communication would be impossible</td>
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<td>P2 If communication were impossible, a culture would not last.</td>
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<td>C Having some value for telling the truth is a transcultural value.</td>
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2. General Rule from the Two Arguments for Transcultural Truth  
   a. There are some moral rules that all societies will have in common, because those rules are necessary for a cultural to exist.  
   b. Therefore, not every moral rule can vary society to society.

E. Objection 5: Cultural Relativism Creates a WE/They Mentality  
   1. CR is not synonymous with tolerance  
      a. Rejects: Tolerance Principle: It is mere arrogance for us to judge the conduct of people outside of society. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the practice of other cultures.  
      2. Tolerance is a transcultural value, and not adopted by every culture.
a. Nazi’s are not tolerant of Jews
3. CR contends that lack of tolerance is *morally acceptable* in certain societies.
a. EX1: Slavery, which was morally acceptable pre-Civil war, is morally acceptable, but certainly does not involve tolerance.

IX. **Cultural relativism’s “grain of truth”**
A. Warns us about the dangers of assuming that all our preferences are based on some **absolute rational standard**.
B. Makes us aware that **some of our customs are in fact relative**, possibly trivial
   1. Ex1: Funeral Practices
   2. Ex2: Public Nudity
C. Cultural relativism provides an antidote for our **cultural prejudices**.
   **KEEP AN OPEN MIND.**
   1. Ex1: Homosexuality
      a. Our strong feelings against homosexuals might not be the product of any strong universal moral value, but the result of a **cultural prejudice**.
      b. Many of the practices and attitudes we think are so natural are really only cultural products.
D. Situational Differences
   1. Encourages us to think about how **situational differences** affect how we view morality
      a. Ex1: Abortion
         i. Pro-Life argument that we should not have an abortion because we can put our children up for adoption.
         ii. What if we live in a society where there is no adoption available, and if we have the child we will not be able to properly take care of him or her?
   2. Situation often influences what we think is right and wrong, and these situation differences are often a product of certain cultural values.

X. **Exercises**
A. P.104, ex#4
B. P.107, ex#2
C. P.124, ex#3

XI. **END MATTER**
A. **History of cultural relativism (Benedict)**
   1. Herodotus’ *Histories*
      For if anyone, no matter, who were given the opportunity of choosing from amongst all the nations of the world the set of beliefs which he thought best, he would inevitably, after careful consideration of their
relative merits, choose that of his own country. Everyone without exception believes that his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best. “Custom is the King over All.”

**B. Ruth Benedict**

**XII. Further Reading**


1. **Re-evaluation of P2**
   a. Difference in Belief-Systems rather than Values
      i. Ex1: Cultural against eating cows because they think eating cows have souls.
      ii. Essential value is not to kill things with souls. We don’t eat our loved ones because there is something valuable about them.
      iii. Modifications in belief-systems could render two different cultural systems identical.
   b. Difference in custom doesn’t entail a difference in moral value.
      i. All Cultures have something in common
      ii. Ex2: Infanticide with Eskimos

**B. Objection 3: Culture and Morality Confusion**

1. Some cultural mandates are not moral (they are trivial), e.g. nudity, wearing of the burkas.

**C. Objection 4: People act more morally when others are not around.**

1. When we are in a group, we often pass off the responsibility of doing the right thing on others.
2. Ex1: Kitty Genevese trial
3. Objection: A million dollars on the ground