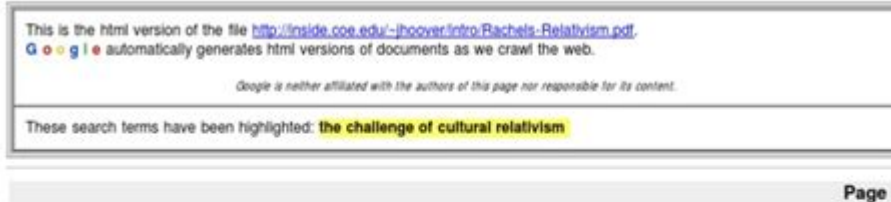


# James Rachels The Challenge Of Cultural Relativism

The Challenge of Cultural Relativism



## The Challenge of Cultural Relativism\*

JAMES RACHELS

*\*From The Elements of Moral Philosophy by James Rachels.  
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James Rachels (1944- ) is the author of *The End of Life* and numerous other articles and books on the problems of practical ethics. He teaches philosophy at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

### HOW DIFFERENT CULTURES HAVE DIFFERENT MORAL CODES

DARIUS, A KING OF ANCIENT PERSIA, was intrigued by the variety of cultures he encountered in his travels. He had found, for example, that the Callatians (a tribe of Indians) customarily ate the bodies of their dead fathers. The Greeks, of course, did not do that—the Greeks practiced cremation and regarded the funeral pyre as the natural and fitting way to dispose of the dead. Darius thought that a sophisticated understanding of the world must include an appreciation of such differences between cultures. One day, to teach this lesson, he summoned some Greeks who happened to be present at his court and asked them what they would take to eat the bodies of their dead fathers. They were shocked, as Darius knew they would be, and replied that no amount of money could persuade them to do such a thing. Then Darius called in some Callatians, and while the Greeks listened asked them what they would take to burn their dead fathers' bodies. The Callatians were horrified and told Darius not even to mention such a dreadful thing.

This story, recounted by Herodotus in his *History*, illustrates a recurring theme in the literature of social science: different cultures have different moral codes. <sup>1</sup> What is thought right within one

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**James Rachels The Challenge of Cultural Relativism** is a critical examination of the concept of cultural relativism and its implications for moral philosophy. Rachels, an influential American philosopher, challenges the notion that moral codes and ethical practices are entirely determined by cultural contexts. In this article, we will delve into Rachels' arguments, explore the implications of cultural relativism, and discuss the broader impact of his work on moral philosophy.

## Understanding Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is the idea that a person's beliefs, values, and practices should be understood

based on that person's own culture, rather than be judged against the criteria of another culture. This perspective argues that there is no single moral framework that can be universally applied to all human societies. Instead, what is considered morally right or wrong can vary dramatically across different cultures.

## **The Origins of Cultural Relativism**

The roots of cultural relativism can be traced back to anthropological studies in the early 20th century. Key points include:

- Anthropologists highlighted the diversity of moral practices across cultures.
- They argued that moral codes are products of cultural evolution.
- This perspective promotes tolerance and understanding of different cultural practices.

While cultural relativism promotes tolerance, it raises significant philosophical challenges, particularly concerning moral truths and ethical judgments.

## **James Rachels' Critique of Cultural Relativism**

James Rachels presents a compelling critique of cultural relativism in his essay "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism." He argues that while understanding cultural differences is essential, this does not mean that all cultural practices are equally valid. Rachels raises several key points against cultural relativism:

### **1. The Problem of Moral Progress**

Rachels argues that cultural relativism makes it difficult to account for moral progress. If moral codes are solely determined by culture, then:

- There can be no basis to criticize harmful practices, such as slavery or discrimination.
- Societies could never be said to improve morally; they could only change.
- This perspective undermines the concept of moral evolution, where societies gradually adopt more humane practices.

## **2. The Fallacy of Cultural Determinism**

Another significant point made by Rachels is the fallacy of cultural determinism. He suggests that believing one's moral framework is entirely shaped by culture ignores the role of individuals in shaping and challenging cultural norms. Key aspects of this argument include:

- Individuals within cultures can recognize and reject harmful practices.
- Morality is not static; it evolves through discourse and critique.
- By acknowledging personal agency, we can promote a more nuanced understanding of ethics beyond cultural confines.

## **3. The Universal Nature of Certain Moral Principles**

Rachels posits that some moral principles are universal and can transcend cultural boundaries. He identifies certain values, such as:

- The prohibition of murder
- The importance of honesty
- The need for caring relationships

These principles, according to Rachels, are fundamental to human life and are recognized across diverse cultures. By advocating for universal moral standards, Rachels challenges the cultural relativist view that morality is entirely culturally bound.

## **Implications of Rachels' Arguments**

Rachels' critique of cultural relativism has profound implications for moral philosophy and ethical practice. Some of these implications include:

### **1. Promoting Critical Dialogue**

Rachels encourages critical dialogue between cultures rather than uncritical acceptance of all practices. This dialogue can lead to:

- A deeper understanding of diverse perspectives.
- Opportunities for ethical improvement.
- Collaboration in addressing global moral issues.

## 2. Ethical Responsibility

By advocating for universal moral principles, Rachels places ethical responsibility on individuals and societies to critique and improve their moral practices. This responsibility includes:

- Questioning harmful traditions.
- Engaging in moral reasoning beyond cultural biases.
- Striving for justice and equality on a global scale.

## 3. A Framework for Global Ethics

Rachels' work provides a foundation for developing a global ethical framework that respects cultural diversity while promoting fundamental human rights. This framework can be instrumental in addressing:

- Global poverty
- Environmental issues
- Human rights abuses

## Conclusion

**James Rachels The Challenge of Cultural Relativism** offers a critical examination of cultural relativism, revealing its limitations and advocating for a more nuanced understanding of morality. Rachels' arguments emphasize the importance of universal moral principles while respecting cultural diversity. By promoting critical dialogue and ethical responsibility, Rachels' work remains a vital contribution to moral philosophy, encouraging us to seek a balance between cultural understanding and ethical accountability. Through this balance, we can foster a more just and humane world that recognizes the complexity of human moral experience.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What is the central thesis of James Rachels' 'The Challenge of Cultural Relativism'?**

The central thesis of Rachels' work is that cultural relativism, the idea that moral truths are relative to cultures, fails to account for universal moral standards and leads to the conclusion that we cannot criticize other cultures, even in cases of human rights violations.

### **How does Rachels argue against cultural relativism?**

Rachels argues against cultural relativism by highlighting the existence of moral disagreements across cultures and suggesting that some values, such as fairness and justice, can be seen as universal. He believes that recognizing these shared values allows for meaningful moral critique.

### **What examples does Rachels provide to illustrate the problems with cultural relativism?**

Rachels provides examples such as practices like slavery and female genital mutilation, arguing that cultural relativism would prevent us from condemning these practices, even though they violate basic human rights that should be universally acknowledged.

### **In what ways does Rachels suggest that cultural relativism could hinder moral progress?**

Rachels suggests that cultural relativism could hinder moral progress by creating a barrier to questioning and improving harmful practices within cultures, as it implies that all cultural practices are equally valid and beyond critique.

### **What alternative does Rachels propose to cultural relativism?**

Rachels proposes a form of ethical universalism, which acknowledges cultural differences while also asserting that some moral principles can be universally applied, allowing for constructive dialogue and moral progress across cultures.

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