

# Philosophy 1100: Ethics

## Topic 4 - Sociological Approaches to Ethics:

1. Some Common Claims of Cultural Relativists
2. Our Formulation of Cultural Relativism: CR
3. The Cultural Differences Argument
4. CR and Tolerance
5. The Reformer's Dilemma
6. The Moral Methodology Argument
7. Lessons to Learn from Cultural Differences

Ruth Benedict, from “Anthropology and the Abnormal,” *Journal of General Psychology* (1934):

“We do not any longer make the mistake of deriving the morality of our locality and decade directly from the inevitable constitution of human nature.

We do not elevate it to the dignity of a first principle.

We recognize that morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits.

Mankind has always preferred to say, ‘It is a morally good,’ rather than ‘It is habitual,’ and the fact of this preference is matter enough for a critical science of ethics.

But historically the two phrases are synonymous.”

# Cultural Differences

**Examples of differences in moral beliefs and practices between cultures:**

- According to Herodotus, the Greeks buried their dead, whereas the Callatians ate their dead. Each thought what the other did was wrong.
- According to Rachels, Eskimos practice infanticide and gericide.
- According to a story on NPR last August, “Parents in Japan allow their kids a lot of independence after a certain age. It isn't uncommon for 7-year-olds and even 4-year-olds to ride the subway by themselves.”

# Cultural Differences

**Examples of differences in moral beliefs and practices between cultures:**

- Slavery: accepted in American South in the 1800's; nowadays we all think it's horrible.
- Polygamy: practiced in many cultures in many eras; illegal in our culture.
- Human sacrifice: practiced in Aztec culture.
- Pederasty: common in Ancient Greece.

# Some Common Claims of Cultural Relativists

According to James Rachels (pp. 18-19):

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one societal code better than another.
3. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is merely one among many.
4. There is no “universal truth” in ethics—that is, there are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times.
5. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that 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.
6. It is mere arrogance for us to try to judge the conduct of other peoples. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the practices of other cultures.

# Our formulation of Cultural Relativism

**CR:** an act is morally right if and only if it is permitted by the moral code of the society of the agent of the act.

The **moral code** of a society at a certain time is the set of moral rules accepted by most of the members of the society at that time.

The **agent** of an act is the person who performs the act.

# How to determine whether an act is right according to CR

1. Identify the agent of the act.
2. Identify the society of that agent.
3. Identify the moral code of that society.
4. Check to see if any of the rules in that moral code prohibit the act in question.
5. If at least one does, then the act is morally wrong; if none do, the act is morally permissible.

# clicker question

What's your opinion? Do you think that CR (or something in the neighborhood) is probably the correct theory of morality?

**A. Yes**, CR (or something very much like it) is probably true.

**B. No**, CR is probably not the right theory.



# The Cultural Differences Argument

Cultural Differences Argument (Rachels' version, paraphrased)

P1. Different societies have different beliefs about right and wrong.

C. Therefore, CR is true.

*What is wrong with this argument?*

It's **INVALID**.

Let's make it valid ...

# The Cultural Differences Argument

## Cultural Differences Argument (valid version)

P1. Different societies have different beliefs about right and wrong.

P2. If different societies have different beliefs about right and wrong, then what's actually right and wrong depends upon the beliefs of society.

P3. If what's actually right and wrong depends upon the beliefs of society, then CR is true.

C. Therefore, CR is true.

# CR and Tolerance

this one has a  
“right answer”

# clicker question

What does Cultural Relativism, as we have formulated it, imply about **tolerance**? In particular, does CR imply that we should be tolerant of the practices of other cultures?

**A. Yes**, CR implies that we should be tolerant of the practices of other cultures.

**B. No**, CR does not imply that we should be tolerant of the practices of other cultures.

**C. It depends** on what our moral code says.

# CR and Tolerance

**The correct answer is C: it depends on what our moral code says.**

If you live in a rather chauvinistic society in which tolerance is frowned upon, it follows, given CR, that you should not be tolerant.

If you live in a society whose moral code requires tolerance, then you are required to be tolerant, if CR is true.

There is thus no merit to the following thought:

“Since morality is relative to culture, we should be more tolerant of the practices of other cultures.”

# CR and Tolerance

The Argument from Tolerance for CR (a bad argument):

P1. We ought to be tolerant of the practices of other cultures.

P2. CR nicely accommodates P1 (in that if CR is true, then P1 is true).

P3. Other theories cannot accommodate P1 (they imply that intolerance is fine).

C. Therefore, CR is probably true.

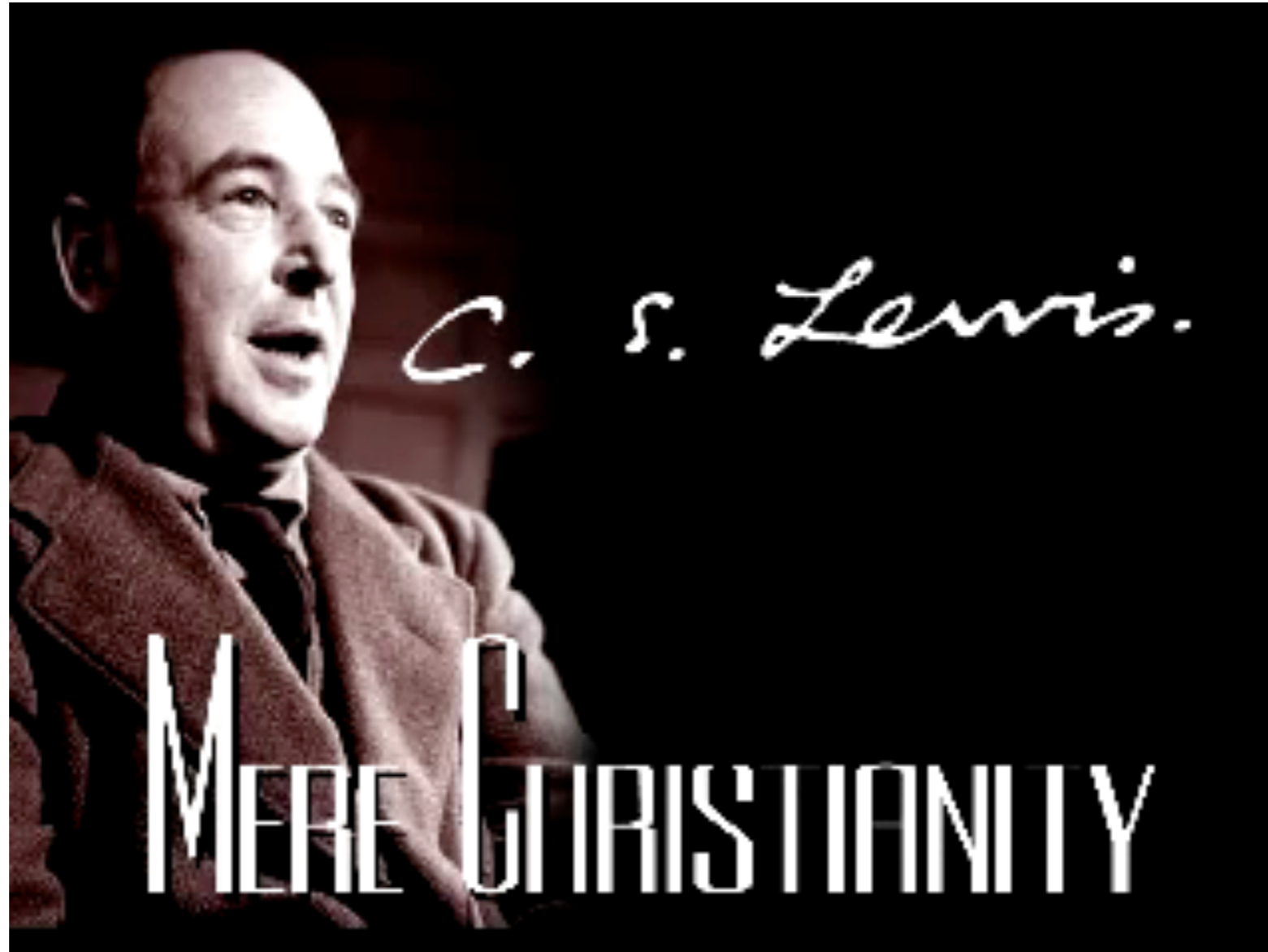
Let's just assume that this form of reasoning is valid.

*Why is this a bad argument?*



- We've already seen why P2 is wrong.
- And what about P3?

# C. S. Lewis on Cultural Relativism



# Arguing Against a Moral Theory

A very common way to argue against a theory:

P1. If theory T is true, then \_\_\_\_\_.

P2. But it's not the case that \_\_\_\_\_.

C. Therefore, theory T is not true.

This argument form is called *modus tollens*.

The first premise draws out a certain implication of the theory.

The second premise asserts that this implication is mistaken.



# The Reformer's Dilemma

“We do believe that some of the people who tried to change the moral ideas of their own age were what we would call Reformers or Pioneers -- people who understood morality better than their neighbours did.”  
- C. S. Lewis

A **moral reformer** is someone who thinks that the moral code of her/his own society is mistaken.

## The Reformer's Dilemma

P1. If CR is true, then every moral reformer is mistaken.

P2. But not every moral reformer is mistaken.

C. Therefore, CR is not true.

# The Moral Methodology

## Argument

cf. Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism," p. 22, #2

*The Story of Sally, the conscientious CU student*

Sally attends a debate on campus on the ethics of human cloning.

One speaker at the debate defends the view the cloning human beings would be morally wrong.

The other speaker argues that human cloning is morally unproblematic.

Sally is reflecting on everything she has heard.

She thinks to herself, "I wonder who's correct. I wonder whether human cloning is right or wrong."

# The Moral Methodology

## Argument

cf. Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism," p. 22, #2

GALLUP POLL


# The Moral Methodology Argument

cf. Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism," p. 22, #2

GALLUP POLL

## MORAL ACCEPTABILITY:

Do you believe that, in general, the following are morally acceptable?



Highly acceptable	Birth control*	90%
Largely acceptable	Divorce*	69%
	Sex between an unmarried man and woman*	66%
	Medical research using stem cells obtained from human embryos*	65%
	Gambling	62%
	The death penalty	61%
	Buying and wearing clothing made of animal fur	58%
	Having a baby outside of marriage*	58%
	Gay or lesbian relations*	58%
	Medical testing on animals	57%

# The Moral Methodology Argument

cf. Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism," p. 22, #2

GALLUP POLL

Contentious

Doctor-assisted suicide\*

52%

Abortion\*

42%

Largely unacceptable

Cloning animals\*

34%

Pornography

33%

Sex between teenagers

30%

Highly unacceptable

Suicide\*

19%

Polygamy, when a married person has more than one spouse at the same time\*

14%

Cloning humans\*

13%

Married men and women having an affair

7%

% Yes, morally acceptable

\*Denotes moral acceptability at or near record high

May 8-11, 2014

GALLUP

# The Moral Methodology Argument

cf. Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism," p. 22, #2

GALLUP POLL

Highly unacceptable

Suicide*	19%
Polygamy, when a married person has more than one spouse at the same time*	14%
Cloning humans*	13%
Married men and women having an affair	7%

% Yes, morally acceptable

\*Denotes moral acceptability at or near record high

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# The Moral Methodology Argument

cf. Rachels, "The Challenge of  
Cultural Relativism," p. 22, #2

## The Moral Methodology Argument

- P1. If CR is true, then Sally can learn whether human cloning is right or wrong simply by consulting the Gallup poll.
- P2. But Sally cannot determine the morality of human cloning in this simple way.
- C. Therefore, CR is not true.

Something else to consider when assessing the plausibility of Cultural Relativism:

***Do the problems for Horn 1 of DCT apply to CR as well?***

- the “what if God commanded something horrible?” problem
- the arbitrariness problem.



# Lessons to Learn from Cultural Differences:

- **Critical Thinking:**

We tend to complacently accept the moral code of our own society; appreciating cultural differences can shake us out of this complacency, and get us to reflect critically on our own moral beliefs, and revise them when necessary.

- **Tolerance:**

When we see that many other cultures do things differently, it can get us to be less sure that our way really is the best way. Since we can't easily be sure that the other culture's way of doing things isn't a good way, we are likely to be more tolerant of other ways of doing things, if we learn about cultural differences.

- **Humility:**

When we see that other cultures do things differently, and we see that we'd think that was the right way if we were born into that culture, this should make us less sure that we've got things right in our culture. It should humble us concerning our ability to figure out what's right and wrong. It shows us that *ethics is hard!*

# Lessons to Learn from Cultural Differences:

- **Critical Thinking**
- **Tolerance**
- **Humility**

*But ...*

*... all of these lessons are compatible with a non-relativist view in ethics.*