

Philosophy 1100: Ethics

Topic 4 - Sociological Approaches to Ethics:

1. Some Common Claims of Cultural Relativists
2. Our Formulation of Cultural Relativism: CR
3. CR and Tolerance
4. The Cultural Differences Argument (for CR)
5. The Argument from the Evaluation of Cultures (against CR)
6. The Gallup Poll Argument (against CR)
7. The Appeals of CR and How Non-Relativists Might Accommodate Them

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. . . .



Ruth Benedict
(1887-1948)

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

... 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.”



Ruth Benedict
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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 recent NPR story, “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.

Beginning-of-Term Questionnaire

QUESTION 2: *In your view, when some act is morally wrong, will the explanation for why the act is wrong always ultimately appeal to the beliefs of the society in which the act was performed, or to its social conventions, or its cultural norms, or some such?*

(a) Yes. Right and wrong is, at bottom, a cultural artifact or a social construction. For an act to be wrong is just for it to violate the customs of the society in which it was performed.

(b) No. When some act is wrong, the explanation for why it is wrong does not always appeal to anything about the beliefs or customs of the society in which it was performed. When some act is wrong, this often has nothing to do with the beliefs or conventions of the society in which it was performed; it has to do with other features of the act.

Some Common Claims of Cultural Relativists, according to James Rachels (pp. 18-19):

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. 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.
3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code better than another's.
4. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is merely one among many.
5. There is no “universal truth” in ethics—that is, there are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times.
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 that was in place at the time the act was performed.

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

To clarify: we'll say that for a rule to be a part of the moral code, it just has to be that *most* members of the society accept it.

And it's not required that most people accept the *whole* code.

How to determine whether an act is right according to CR

1. Identify the agent of the act.
2. Identity the society of that agent.
3. Determine 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.

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 tolerant 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 common 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 moral theories cannot accommodate P1 (they imply that intolerance is just 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?

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)

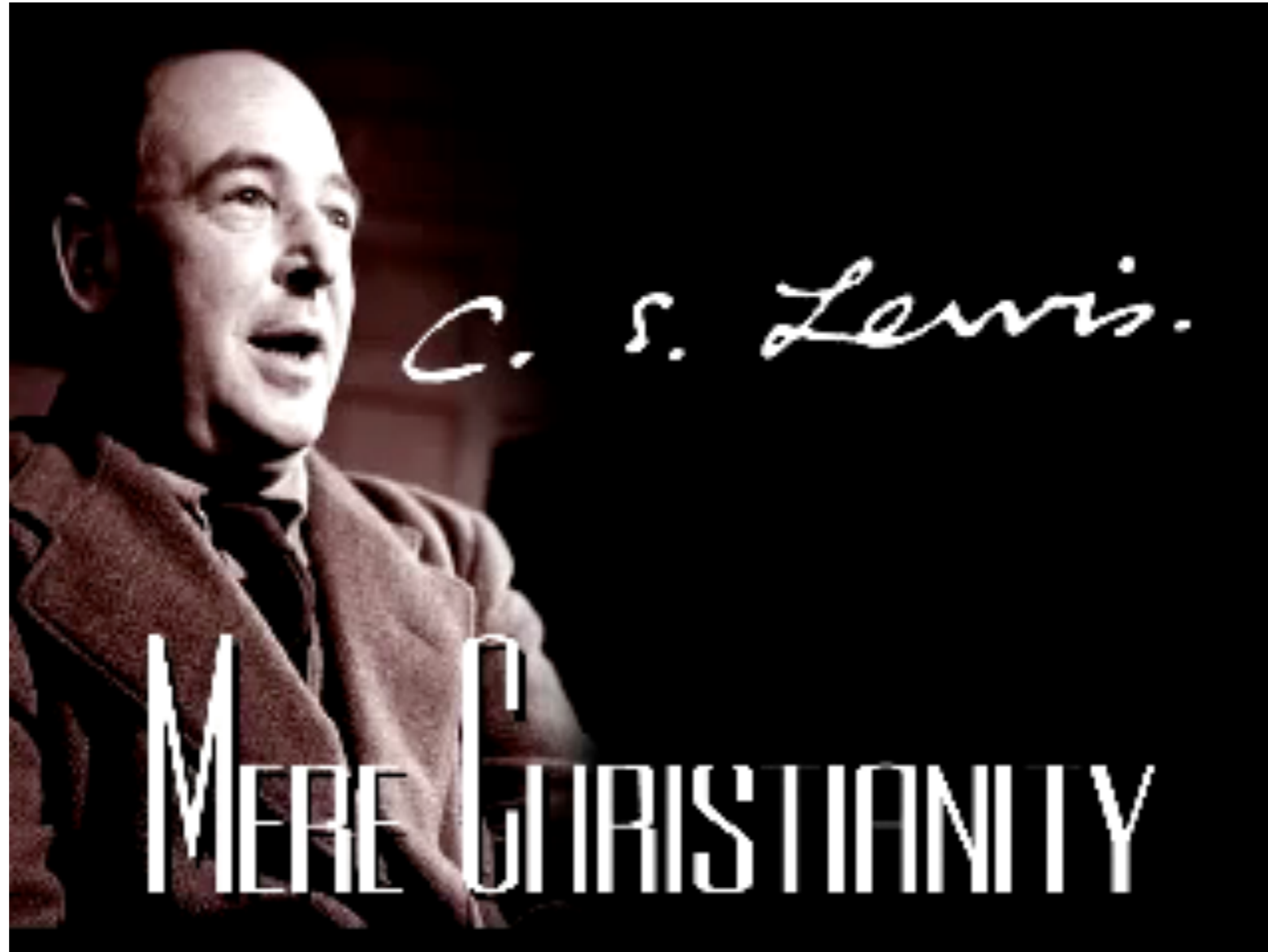
P1. Different societies have different beliefs about right and wrong.

→ 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.

C. S. Lewis on Cultural Relativism



Arguing Against a Moral Theory

A very common way to argue against a theory in philosophy (and also in science):

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 Argument from the Evaluation of Cultures

“When you think about these differences between the morality of one people and another, do you think that the morality of one people is ever better or worse than that of another? ... 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

The Argument from the Evaluation of Cultures

P1. If CR is true, then it cannot be the case that the morality of one culture is better or worse than the morality of another culture.

P2. But this can be the case.

C. Therefore, CR is not true.

Beginning-of-Term Questionnaire

QUESTION 9: Is it at least conceivable that one culture and its practices could be morally better than another culture and its practices?

(a) Yes.

(b) No.

The Argument from the Evaluation of Cultures

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Providing Rationales for Premises

In this class, for any argument that we discuss, in addition to knowing the premises and the conclusion of the argument, you need to be able to give the rationale for *each premise* of the argument.

The **rationale** of a premise is the reason that it is supposed to be true. It is the reason that a proponent of the argument would give for thinking that the premise is true. It is in fact a little sub-argument that premise.

Let's look at an example ...

Providing Rationales for Premises

An exam question might require you to give the rationale for this premise:

PI. If CR is true, then it cannot be the case that the morality of one culture is better or worse than the morality of another culture.

Here would be a good answer:

Providing Rationales for Premises

Here would be a good answer:

“The morality of a culture” refers to the moral code of a culture, which is the set of moral rules that are accepted by a culture. CR says that the moral code of a culture is what determines right and wrong in that culture. There are no other ultimate standards for right and wrong. If that is so, then there would seem to be no way for the morality of one culture to be any better or worse than the morality of another culture. This is because for that to be the case, there would have to be some culture-independent standard by which to judge moral codes. CR implies that there is no such culture-independent standard. The moral codes of the world’s various cultures are the only standards that there are.

The Argument from the Evaluation of Cultures

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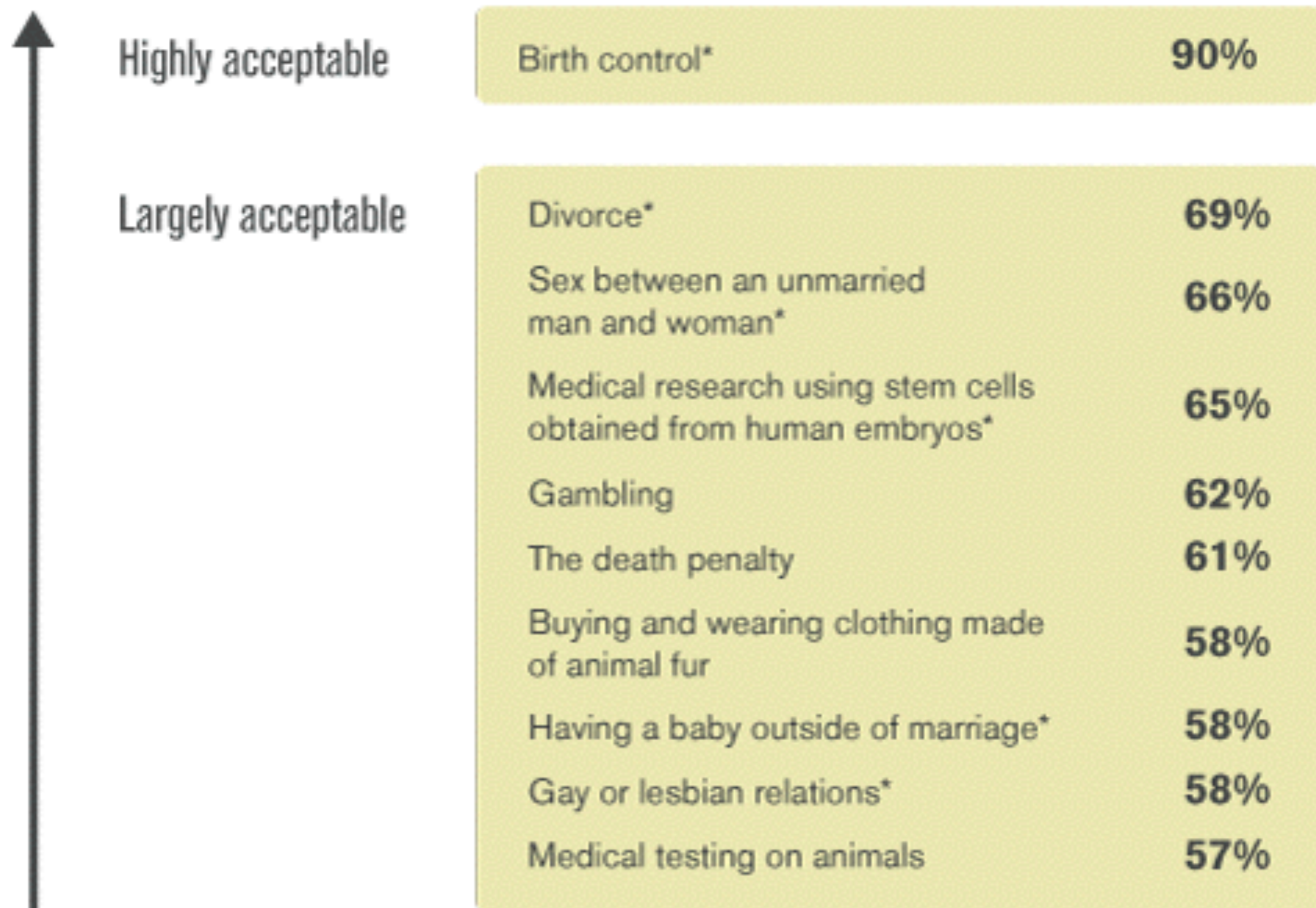
The Gallup Poll Argument

GALLUP POLL

MORAL ACCEPTABILITY:

GALLUP POLL

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





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 Gallup Poll Argument

The Gallup Poll Argument

P1. Americans have the wrong view about at least one of the issues in the Gallup Poll.

P2. If that is true, the CR is false.

C. Therefore, CR is false.

The Appeals of CR

If we hold beliefs that are inconsistent with Cultural Relativism, why are we still attracted to the view?

1. We value tolerance.

▶ *We should value tolerance! But we don't have to be relativists to value tolerance.*

2. Cultural differences make us unsure who is right.

▶ *They should make us unsure! Ethics is hard. But we don't have to be relativists to think this. In fact ...*

3. It seems that sometimes right and wrong really is dependent on cultural customs.

▶ *We don't have to be relativists to accept this either!*

How Morality Can Depend on Culture, Even if CR is False

Recall the Greeks and the Callatians ...

from Herodotus' *Histories* (c. 440 B.C.):

... if one were to offer men to choose out of all the customs in the world such as seemed to them the best, they would examine the whole number, and end by preferring their own; so convinced are they that their own usages far surpass those of all others. ... [This] may be seen by ... the following. Darius, after he had got the kingdom, called into his presence certain Greeks who were at hand, and asked—“What he should pay them to eat the bodies of their fathers when they died?” To which they answered, that there was no sum that would tempt them to do such a thing. He then sent for certain Indians, of the race called Callatians, men who eat their fathers, and asked them, while the Greeks stood by, and knew by the help of an interpreter all that was said—“What he should give them to burn the bodies of their fathers at their decease?” The Indians exclaimed aloud, and bade him forbear such language. Such is men's wont herein; and Pindar was right, in my judgment, when he said, “Custom is the king o'er all.”

How Morality Can Depend on Culture, Even if CR is False

Recall the Greeks and the Callatians.

Maybe it really is right for the Greeks to cremate their dead and it really is right for the Callatians to eat their dead. (This is what CR says.)

But non-relativists or “objectivists” can say this too!

For maybe the following is an objectively true, culture-independent moral principle:

RP: We should respect people.

And maybe *the means by which we respect people* vary from culture to culture.

clicker question

Now that you have thought much more deeply about Cultural Relativism, what do you think of the theory now?

A. I think that CR (or something very much like it) is (still) probably true.

B. I think that CR is probably not the right theory.