

Introduction to Philosophy

The Nature of Morality: Moral Conventionalism

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Readings

- Ruth Benedict, “Anthropology and the Abnormal”.
- James Rachels, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism”.

Background

Moral relativism is the notion that there are no universally valid moral principles, but that all moral principles are valid relative to cultural or individual choice. There are two forms of moral relativism: (1) moral conventionalism, which views morality as based solely on social acceptance, and (2) moral subjectivism, which views moral validity as a personal decision. In these readings, Ruth Benedict assembles data from her anthropological research on tribal behavior from which she draws her conclusion that moral conventionalism is correct. James Rachels analyzes the structure of Benedict’s position—which he calls “cultural relativism”—to show it goes beyond what the facts or arguments can establish. (We’ll see moral subjectivism next.)

Questions

1. What does Ruth Benedict mean by saying that “morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits”? According to Benedict, why can’t I, as an American, criticize the bereavement traditions of the Kwakiutl?
2. Why does James Rachels claim the Benedict’s Cultural Differences Argument is unsound? What unsettling consequences of cultural relativism does he identify? Why does he believe that all cultures must hold some values in common? Why might it not be intolerant for Americans to criticize the Kwakiutl?
3. Benedict and Rachels cannot both be right. While both share some of the same premises (e.g., that different cultures have different customs), they have different conclusions. Therefore, where exactly in their respective arguments do they disagree? Which position is supported by the strongest and most compelling argument?