

Reading/Study Questions for James Rachels' *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (5e)

Chapter Two

In philosophy, an argument is a set/group of claims in which at least one claim, but usually several claims, in the set provide(s) support for, or reasons to accept the truth of, one of the other claims in the set. The supporting claims are called premises, while the claim supported is called a conclusion. There are two things we are interested in when evaluating an argument—(1) the truth of each of the premises, and (2) the form of the argument. A SOUND argument is one that is compelling, one that we ought to be persuaded by if we are rational. When we aim to convince someone that some particular claim is true or reasonable, we ourselves should aim to convey that claim as the conclusion of a sound argument. A **sound argument**, by definition, has a valid argumentative form and all true premises. What is argumentative form? This is a bit tricky. For our purposes, argumentative form refers to the *relationship* between the premises and the conclusion—in particular, we want to know if the premises offered in an argument are sufficient to prove the truth of the conclusion. When an argument has (deductively) valid form, then the truth of the premises would guarantee the truth of the conclusion. Often we work from arguments that have something less than this degree of strength—that is, less than a guarantee. But we want to ask ourselves, IF the premises of a given argument were true (even if we can see they are not), *would* their truth be sufficient to convince us of the truth of the conclusion? What is the likelihood that the conclusion could still be false even if all the premises *were* true? The higher the possibility or likelihood, the worse the argumentative form; the lower the likelihood, the better the argumentative form. In addition to assessing the argumentative form, we want in fact to investigate the premises—if we find even one false premise, the argument before us can be ignored. So, we want to look at BOTH argumentative form AND the truth value of the premises. One further thing to remember—even if we are presented with one argument for a particular claim that is a bad argument (because it has false premises or weak/invalid argumentative form), it does not follow that we have shown that the conclusion of that argument is false. There may be several arguments offered for a single conclusion; even if many of the arguments offered are bad ones, this doesn't mean that they all are; even if all the arguments we are presented are bad in some way, this itself will not be sufficient to show that the conclusion is false.

In chapter two, you need to keep separate in your mind the distinction between three things. First, there is **Cultural Relativism**; this is simply the claim that different cultures accept or believe different claims about what is morally valuable. Next there is the **Cultural Differences Argument**, which is a set of claims arranged so as to constitute an argument for Moral or Ethical Relativism. **Moral or Ethical Relativism** is distinct from Cultural Relativism. Moral Relativism is (one part of) the conclusion of the Cultural Differences Argument. Keep these distinctions in mind as you do the reading with the questions below in mind!

1. In §2.2, Rachels, in describing Cultural Relativism, remarks, “These customs [of different societies] cannot be said to be ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ for that implies we have an independent standard of right and wrong by which they may be judged.” In this passage, what does the word ‘independent’ mean? What is another way of saying the same thing—what other phrase does Rachels use to denote the same thing as ‘an independent standard of right and wrong’?

2. In §2.3, Rachels makes a point about 'the form of argument' that is contained in the Cultural Differences Argument. Using the introductory note above, what main problem does Rachels find with the Cultural Differences Argument? Based upon this initial objection to the Cultural Differences Argument as covered in §2.3, what can we say about the conclusion of the Cultural Differences Argument?
3. What are the three central consequences of accepting ethical or moral relativism (i.e., of accepting the conclusion of the Cultural Differences Argument)?
4. *Thinking on your own here*, how does moral relativism relate to toleration? How does toleration impose obligations on you? How does the value of toleration offer you protection? Are these obligations and protections of toleration available if moral relativism is true?
5. The Cultural Differences Argument relies on the premise that different cultures have different beliefs. What elements constitute (or make up) a particular custom or customary practice? (Think of the practice in Hindu culture of avoiding the slaughtering of cows.) How does identifying these multiple constitutive elements affect the Cultural Differences argument? Does it strengthen it? Does it weaken it? How so?
6. In §2.6, Rachels suggests that there must be at least *some* universal moral values? *Why must* there exist, according to Rachels, some universal values across cultures? What are some examples?
7. In §2.7, Rachels suggests that the discussion surrounding the case of Fauziya Kassindja reveals that people who disagreed about excision actually implied a cultural-transcendent standard of moral value. Explain what Rachels means here.
8. What three reasons does Rachels articulate as to why thoughtful people might be reluctant to criticize other cultures for their practices? Do these reasons stand up to rational scrutiny? Why or why not? (You might think back to your thoughts on toleration in response to question 8.)
9. What is Rachel's ultimate judgment about (1) Moral Relativism and (2) the Cultural Differences Argument offered to support it?